

THE 2016 EXCLUSIVES
SHAPING XBOX ONE

FINAL FANTASY XV: THE
GREATEST JRPG EVER?

15 SWEETEST ROMANCES
IN XBOX HISTORY



XBOX

OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE



HITMAN

THREE HOURS IN 10'S
VICIOUS MURDER
SANDBOX!

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

QUANTUM BREAK

FIRST HANDS-ON + EXCLUSIVE STUDIO ACCESS!

How the creator of Max Payne and Alan Wake
is reinventing the shooter on Xbox One

TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION

Hands-on with the game
that's GTA meets Destiny!

DOOM: BIGGER AND BETTER?

We take on the forces of
hell with just a chainsaw

Future

ALSO INSIDE!

LEGO AVENGERS RATED / BANNER SAGA
HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION / UNRAVEL
THIS WAR OF MINE / OXENFREE REVIEWED
ALAN WAKE REVISITED / HORROR SPECIAL

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EDITOR'S LETTER

A glitch in time saves Xbox One



"WE CAN FINALLY
PLAY GAMES THAT
HAVE DAZZLED
FROM AFAR"

Imagine sitting down to interview a developer about the hero of his latest game, only to find he *is* the hero from his previous game. That's Sam Lake, Remedy's creative director and the face of Max Payne. Of course, tech has moved on since the studio pasted his face on its bullet-dodging cop, and *Quantum Break* is a bullish display of Xbox One's technical grunt. Turn to p28 for our impression of its first few hours.

If there's a theme this issue, it's that we can finally play games that have dazzled from afar. Besides *Quantum Break* (one of the first Xbox One games announced) we also go hands-on with *Hitman*, *The Division* and *DOOM*. And all of them were well worth the wait. Enjoy!

Matthew

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Meet the... OXM CONTRIBUTORS



Alex Dale
Deputy editor

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Alex spent most of the month on vacation in Thailand, where he did whatever it is people do when in Bangkok. We ransacked his house while he was away, to get him in the right frame of mind for reviewing *Gone Home*.



Tom Stone
Staff writer

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Not for Tom the sweltering heat of Thailand; he opted for the chillier climes of Finland, where he saw *Quantum Break* and tried the country's national dish, reindeer. It tastes of "socks and tears," apparently.



Emma Davies
Dead to us

Live OXM [Emma](#)

Twitter [@emcetera](#)

Say goodbye to this grinning turncoat: Emma has left OXM to fulfil her life's ambition of travelling around the globe, spreading the word of the movie *Cheaper By The Dozen 2*. How will we ever replace her? With a sack of potatoes, maybe.



Joe Skrebels
Community manager

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As the only member of Team OXM who didn't spend Valentine's Day weeping into a lonely bowl of SpaghettiOs,* Joe was the perfect choice to investigate the greatest romances in Xbox history.
*He simply prefers Cup Noodles.



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XBOX ONE & WINDOWS 10 EXCLUSIVE

ALL FOR ONE, OR ONE TAKES ALL

FABLE LEGENDS

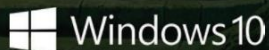


IT IS A TIME OF HEROES IN ALBION.

But while every fable needs a hero, every legend needs a villain.

Play for free and experience cross-device multiplayer on Xbox One* and Windows 10 PC.

FableLegends.com



*Requires Xbox Live Gold membership, sold separately. Game offers in-app purchases.





XBOX #186
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

CONTENTS

DASHBOARD

NEWS AND INTERVIEWS CURATED FOR YOUR EASY DIGESTION

8 Big in 2016

We take a good gawp at Microsoft's plans for 2016.

12 We're all Doomed

Building an FPS paradise in the depths of perdition.

FEATURES

28 Quantum Break

Killing time, and using time to kill, with Remedy Games.

52 Divided We Fall

Cleaning New York's mean streets in Ubisoft's shooter.

80 The 15 Greatest Romances in Xbox History

OXM gets in the mood for another Valentine's Day (alone).

PREVIEWS

40 Homefront: The Revolution

44 Dirt Rally

46 Assetto Corsa

47 One Piece: Burning Blood

48 Hitman

REVIEWS

62 Oxenfree

64 Assassin's Creed Chronicles: India

65 Gone Home: Console Edition

66 This War of Mine: The Little Ones

68 Unravel

69 Resident Evil Zero: HD

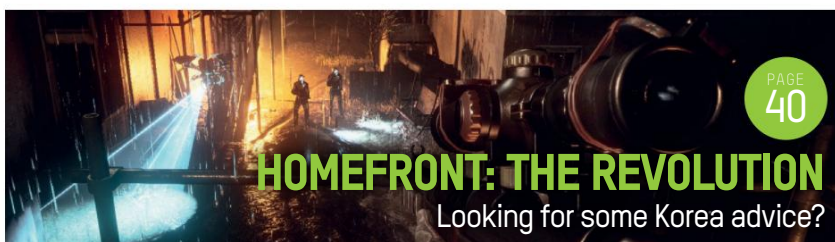
70 The Banner Saga

72 Lego Marvel's Avengers

73 Sebastien Loeb Rally Evo

74 Lovely Planet

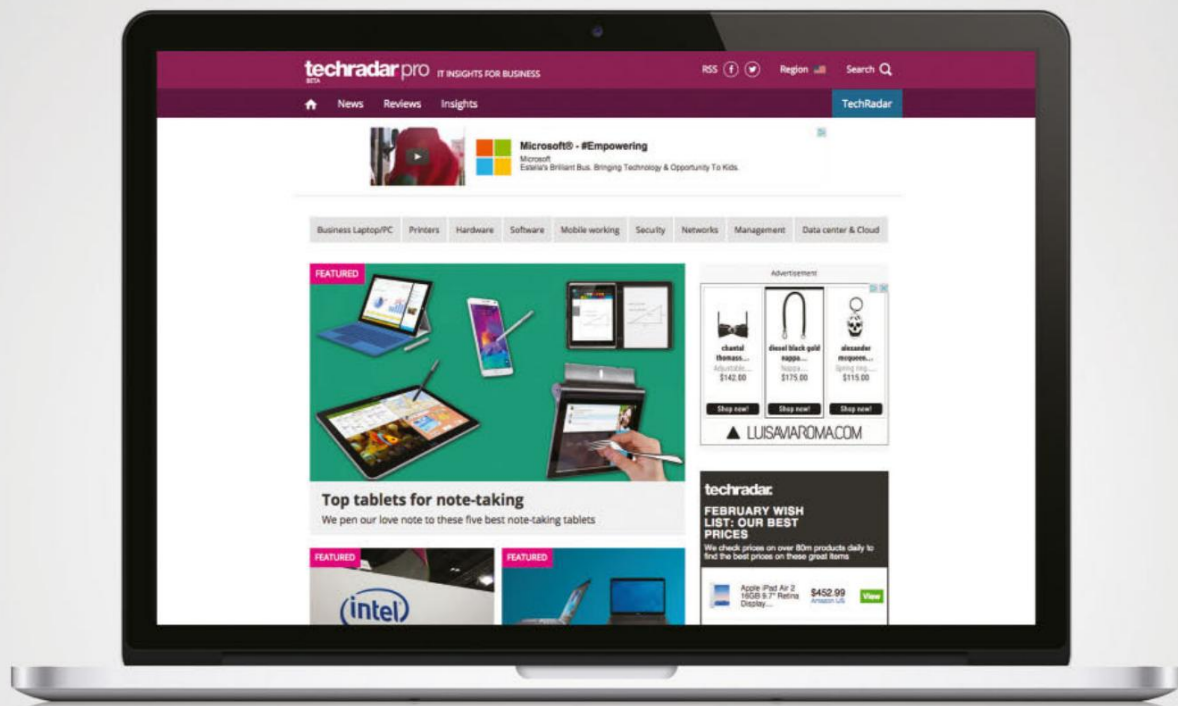
75 Reviews roundup



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INSIDER

XBOX NEWS, ANALYSIS, CULTURE, OPINION & MORE

Five minutes after this screen was taken, all of this was smoldering ash.

COMEBACK COMPLETE, TIME FOR **THE NEXT LEVEL**

So how do you follow your "greatest games lineup in Xbox history"? Just keep releasing essential games...



Backwards Compatibility rules Xbox

Since Xbox 360 backwards compatibility was added to Xbox One, gamers have clocked 21 million hours of play. That's a whole lot of Doritos Crash Course. From now on, games won't appear in monthly batches, but as they are ready to release. Hooray!



Kickstart 'Die Hard meets Deus Ex'

Canadian outfit Interdimensional is looking for \$450,000 to fund *Consortium: The Tower*, a skyscraper-infiltration game set in 2042 that champions freedom of approach. "Now I have slightly more futuristic machinegun, ho ho ho."

//CRACKDOWN 3'S MULTIPLAYER IS ARGUABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF XBOX ONE'S 2016 LINEUP//



If demolishing a virtual city seems full-on, why not pamper *ReCore*'s robot pooch instead?

Completed *Halo 5*, *Arkham Knight* and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* yet? How about *The Witcher 3* and *Metal Gear Solid V*? Or 4% of *Fallout 4*? Two months into 2016 and we're still leaping, shooting, stabbing, dashing, exploring and desperately trying to get through last year's incredible releases.

Not that this was for lack of trying. December 28 2015 is now officially the day with the most active users on Xbox Live ever. *Halo 5*, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, *Forza 6* and *Gears of War: Ultimate Edition* all sold over a million copies each. Game producer Rod Fergusson also claimed that 45% of *Ultimate Edition* sales were to people new to the *Gears* series. Don't know how he got that information, but we're going to stop leaving the Kinect on while we sleep. Backwards Compatibility, Early Access, four free games a month with Gold... If 2015 was the year you upgraded, you couldn't have chosen better.

But 2015 is dead, and just four days into the new year, we were surprised to see the release windows for some of our most anticipated games being reshuffled. Some were disappointing, *Scalebound* now becoming one of our most anticipated 2017 games, and we'll have to wait until the latter half of this year to see Keiji Inafune's robo-dog oddity, *ReCore*. But the reshuffle also saw some releases pulled forward. *Gears of War 4* went from being an ambiguous "Holiday 2016" to the admittedly-also-pretty-ambiguous "Fall 2016". That's still not a concrete date, but it's great to hear we won't be waiting quite as long.

RAINBOW SUMMER

The bigger surprise is that *Crackdown 3* will be with us a lot earlier than we expected, or at least some of it. Its multiplayer has been listed for a summer release. Worrying at first, since 2015 was a mixed bag for multiplayer-focused titles. The excellent *Rainbow Six Siege* still sits proudly in our directory, but 12-month-old *Evolve* now feels like ancient history, and even *Star Wars Battlefront* suffered from lower sales on Xbox One. Difference is, *Crackdown 3* will eventually have a substantial single-player campaign, ☺



Mighty Number 9 delayed to Spring 2016

Keiji Inafune's run-and-gunner has missed yet another release date, due to "network issues". Fess up, Inafune – you spent the Kickstarter funds on pizza, didn't you?



» one that'll hopefully capture the free-jumping brilliance of the original, avoiding the pitfalls of *Crackdown 2*'s fussy mutant overload.

We wouldn't be surprised if the multiplayer has been pulled forward because of its potential for future Xbox One games. *Crackdown 3* uses cloud computing to run a multiplayer experience with the power of multiple consoles. Several online players will be able to do epic battle in a fully destructible city, without slowdown reducing the framerate to a crawl or your Xbox One bursting into flames. Producer Dave Jones has compared the level of action to the Superman v Zod fight at the end of *Man of Steel* (let's hope it's less weirdly boring). Anyone who's seen *Crackdown 3* in action knows this shouldn't be possible on Xbox One. It's like watching someone play *Halo 5* on a Game Boy.

"What if game creators had a way to leverage the computational power available in the cloud to solve complex tasks that could never have been done on a single system? What new horizons of gaming could they open up?" asks the official website for Cloudbine, Dave Jones' company that aims to help developers use cloud computing to enhance their games. In being the

You'll have to put up with screenshots of *Scalebound* a little longer. But it'll be worth the wait come 2017.

test run, *Crackdown 3*'s multiplayer is arguably the most important game of Xbox One's 2016 line-up. If it works as well as it does in the demo, this could permanently change expectations of what's possible from our games.

BETA THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

An increasing confidence and commitment to multiplayer seems to be a running theme of Xbox

One in 2016. Multiplayer betas for *Fable Legends* and *Gears of War 4* launch in Spring; Rare's upcoming swashbuckling MMO *Sea of Thieves* is the most ambitious game we've ever seen from the studio. *Killer Instinct* becomes a more essential multiplayer fighter every year – it'll start its third victory lap with *Season 3* in March. We'll be seeing *Gigantic*, Microsoft's free-to-play don't-call-it-*Battleborn* MOBA inside this year, and Mojang's latest slice of multiplayer madness, *Cobalt*, will be available by the time you read this. We wonder if *Scalebound*'s delay

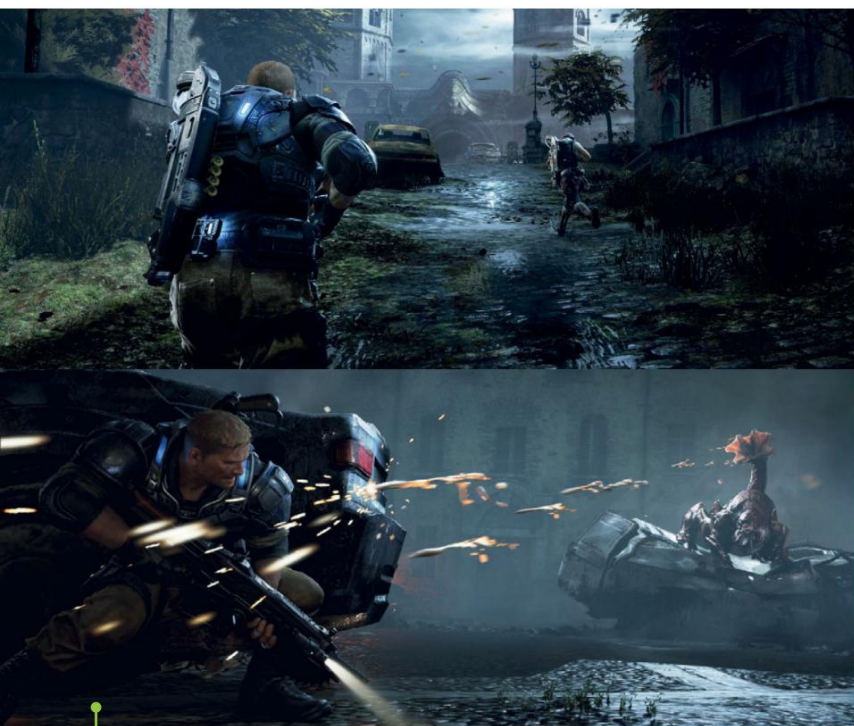
Pirate MMO *Sea of Thieves* lets you indulge in plundering fantasies. Let's raid an ocean liner!





Stranger of Sword City hits Xbox One

Are you a fan of swords, stats and ladies with improbable cat ears? Then reserve some hard drive space for Experience Inc's JRPG, arriving March 22.



Former *Gears of War* dev Cliff Bleszinski recently took to Twitter to endorse the work The Coalition has been doing.

might be more to do with thinning the multiplayer herd (it also has four-man co-op) than any quality concerns.

2016 isn't thin on single-player titles either, like *ReCore* and *Quantum Break* (see our full feature on page 28, then rewind time and finish this). But after three years of beautiful games that could sometimes be finished in an afternoon, and broken titles that were released unfinished and then patched back up for months after, it feels like we're finally seeing the more substantial releases we were promised at the start of this console generation. *Gears of War 4* and this month's cover game have been a long time coming (and *Scalebound* is now going to be even longer).

But it feels like the rushed, inconsistent development cycles we often saw at the start of this generation

are coming to an end. Now we're seeing confident releases timed throughout the year, with big titles like *Gears* and *Crackdown* and indie gems like *Cuphead*. And for the third time in a row, Xbox One closes out the year with a *Halo* title, courtesy of *Halo Wars 2*.

What excites us is that this lineup barely scratches the surface. We don't know what 2016 releases will be announced at E3 (both *Rare Replay* and *Gears of War: Ultimate Edition* weren't revealed until E3 last year, and turned out to be two of 2015's best). Then there's third-party games like *The Division*, *Homefront: The Revolution*, *Dark Souls 3*, *Doom* and *Hitman*.

This time next year, we'll be looking back at *Gears of War 4*, *Crackdown 3*, *Quantum Break*, and *Blinx: The Dark Timesweeper Returns* (let us dream) and who knows what else. The days of Xbox One playing catch-up are over. All that it's interested in playing in 2016 is the best games.

Tom Stone

//DECEMBER 28 2015 IS NOW
OFFICIALLY THE DAY WITH THE MOST
ACTIVE USERS ON XBOX LIVE EVER//

THIS MONTH WE LEARNED...

p12



On a visit to Hell, it's always sensible to have a chainsaw to hand.

p14



Trying to sell Tom a game before it's finished is a really bad move.

p15



Given a choice between good and bad, we'll side with our inner villain.

p16



If you like to scare yourself silly, then Xbox One really is the place to be.

p20



PlatinumGames is applying its fighting magic to *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.

DASHBOARD

LOCK, LOAD, AND KEEP RUNNING

MOD'S LAW

Your character has an upgrade tree which can be used to further ramp up the pace. Where you invest your XP depends on your preferred playing style – would you rather be more agile, or quicker at swapping between weapon mods?

SNAPMAPCHAT

Crafting a fiendish level in *DOOM*'s SnapMap editor is quick and easy, thanks to the way furniture “snaps” together like Lego. Custom inventions are saved as small info files, so they're painless to boot up and fill little hard drive space.

CHAIN REACTIONS

One weapon notably absent from the weapon wheel is your trusty chainsaw, which is accessed instantly via the D-pad and one-hit kills all but the stockiest enemy types. It's ideal for close-quarters combat but tied to how many fuel cells you have.

GUTS AND GORY

Freshly-revealed level and weapon modding details offer further evidence that *DOOM* is 2016's fastest, silliest, goriest shooter

What's the story?

Okay, so we may have lied about the “fresh” part. The latest hands-on session takes us quite literally into the belly of the beast – seeing us clamber into the maw of a rotting Titan corpse in the depths of the inferno. From this toothy perch, we descend all the way into the hellish city-sized creature's bowels, where the breakneck, gore-splattered action continues apace.

Why should I care?

Because after a decade of tactical cover-shooters, this is a throwback to a wilder era. There is no waist-height cover in the (literal) bowels of hell; your standard speed is sprinting, and relentless hordes of hellbeasts swarm over you like ants around a packet of candy. They utilize every inch of the vertical level design, with many heading for high ground to rain fire on you.

What happens next?

You fight back with *DOOM*'s selection box of mad weapons, all of which can be augmented with bolt-on mods. Take the Shotgun as an example – once you find 'em, you can hotswap between mods that transform it into an over-powerful charged shot weapon, and another that effectively turns it into a portable grenade launcher. Did we mention this isn't a tactical cover-shooter?



Mortal Kombat goes XL on March 4th

Sacrificing Roman-numeral accuracy for the sake of a clever pun, Warner Bros has announced *Mortal Kombat XL* – an enhanced version of *Mortal Kombat X* that includes all the DLC to date.

BFG AWOL?

The BFG is also missing from the weapon wheel – instead, you pull the series' most iconic weapon out of your box of tricks by pressing X. We haven't seen it in action, but we're told it's best used as a "panic button."

VAT'S ENTERTAINMENT

You swap between weapons via a radial menu, which allows you to catch your breath by slowing down the action, à la *Fallout*'s VATS system. If you don't want to break your flow, you can change weapons via the right bumper instead.

UPPERS & DOWNERS

This month's temperature, taken

WHAT'S HOT?

1



DESTINY

Bungie romanced its community this past Valentine's Day with a specially-timed two-on-two multiplayer mode.

2



THE DIVISION'S DOG-POOPING ANIMATION

Steaming hot, this one. But, can you use it to make patrolling vehicles slip on the stuff, like you can in *Metal Gear Solid V*?

3



SPACE GIRAFFE

Jeff Minter's synesthesia shooter is the most interesting title in the latest Backwards Compatibility drop.

WHAT'S NOT?

1



RAINBOW SIX SIEGE DLC OPERATORS

One has an under-barrel shotgun attachment, one lays deadly doormats. We see how they missed the first cut.

2



NO NEW ASSASSIN'S CREED THIS YEAR

The series has been crying out for a break for half a decade, but we'll miss our annual hit of historical eye candy.

“I THOUGHT A SEASON PASS WAS MEANT TO OFFER GOOD VALUE. SO WHY AM I NOW PAYING FOR GAMES THAT DON'T YET EXIST?”

Tom worries we're seeing a dangerous new trend - pay now, find out what you're getting later



We don't know what the actual DLC will be yet, but it will start coming early next year.

That's a quote from Bethesda's website at the end of 2015, announcing the \$29.99 *Fallout 4* season pass. Bethesda has a good track record in DLC for *Fallout 3* and *Skyrim* (let's be kind and not dwell on *Oblivion*'s horse armor), but this is still a major studio asking for \$30 for a game add-on it's not willing to tell you anything about. It can't. It doesn't even know what it is yet. It feels like I'm Kickstarting *Fallout 4.1*, and the description is just a GIF of Pete Hines shrugging.

I thought we weren't going to tolerate this anymore? Not after the angry reception Warner Bros got after announcing a \$39.99 *Arkham Knight* season pass. Only fan outcry made it actually tell us what would be in there, and even then it left out crucial details. Such as specific release dates. And that most of the new stuff was trash. It's amazing to think a publisher can ask for that sort of money without telling you what you're getting. But how much backlash is there when it comes to *Fallout 4* charging \$29.99 and being just as tight-lipped? None.

A season pass is meant to offer value. You can buy chunks of DLC separately or get all of them with a season pass for a reduced price. It's when the DLC isn't out yet that a season pass becomes an issue. Now we're getting publishers expecting us to pay \$39.99 for a "mystery box" of game add-ons. Ooh, this month it's a Catwoman level that lasts all of 20 minutes. What a great way



to remind me that a season pass is non-refundable. Or we get a season pass offering extras that will inevitably unbalance the game. Take *Star Wars Battlefront*, a great shooter held back by



Fallout 4's DLC casts you as a Radroach rolling dung across the Commonwealth. Maybe.

having only 13 maps. Despite retailing at \$59.99, it expects you to pay another \$49.99 for the season pass if you want to see the next 16 maps, plus new modes and extras. Soon, the game is going to be split between the rich elite willing to pay a huge \$109.98 (the "Empire") and those who refuse to practically pay for a game twice just to see all of it (the "Rebels"). *Halo 5: Guardians* and *Rainbow Six Siege* are both giving all of their future maps away free to avoid this exact problem. *Siege* is also clear upfront about exactly what its season pass offers you - which apparently isn't a necessity anymore.

This season pass based business model of "pay now, find out what you get later" is changing our expectations of

what buying a full game is. The issue confuses publishers, too - look at how Square Enix has backflipped on *Hitman*'s delivery model. What was announced as a retail-priced game with a drip-feed of episodes was delayed and repackaged as a hefty starter pack (around half the game) with further levels to follow. And now the game is a full-on episodic release with murder sandboxes released over the course of the year. This is more attractive than the \$60 "IOU one *Hitman* game" that was originally offered, but the fact that such a deal was suggested in the first place shows us how crazy things have become. I get that it takes time to develop ambitious games, just as it takes time to develop 16 new *Battlefront* maps, but fans shouldn't have to foot the bill in the meantime. It used to be that if you liked a demo, you could buy the game. In 2016 it feels like we're asked to buy the demo. The game? That comes later.

NEXT MONTH Tom says capitalism is dead and all games should be free. Here's your pink slip, comrade.

//WE'RE GETTING PUBLISHERS EXPECTING US TO PAY \$39.99 FOR A 'MYSTERY BOX' OF GAME ADD-ONS//



Star Wars Battlefront DLC revealed

New maps begin to land in March, taking us to Jabba the Hutt's palace, the Cloud City and - the old 'not-a-moon' itself - the Death Star.

DASHBOARD



Words can't describe how much we wish Henry Cavill was wearing this in the new movie.

HOLDING OUT FOR A HERO

Just in time for the next 3,492 superhero movies

Excited about *Batman v Superman*? How about *Joker v Poison Ivy*? Or *Killer Croc v Bizarro*? We're not just fantasizing about films superior to that Zack Snyder nonsense: all these epic bouts will be possible now *DC Universe Online* is Biff! Wham! Pow!-ing onto Xbox One.

More action-oriented than the usual MMORPG, *DC Universe Online* lets you create your own unique superhero. You choose a mentor - someone like Lex Luthor if you're an awesome villain or Wonder Woman if you're a wussy hero. Then you can save citizens or put them in danger, or battle supervillains/pesky do-gooders, earning combos and superpowers (such as shooting deadly bolts of electricity and engulfing foes in flames) as you level up. Fast, fun combat keeps it engaging, but what

makes *Universe* stand out from the MMO crowd is its excellent use of the DC license.

Most of the action is set in shiny Metropolis and shadowy Gotham City, but don't expect *Arkham Knight* levels of detail. It's fully voiced, too, including another terrific performance from Mark Hamill as The Joker (rumor is, his next diabolical scheme is posting *Force Awakens* spoilers on Twitter) and fantastic comic-book-come-to-life cutscenes. You can decorate your secret hideout, then fly through the city, looking for citizens to help/havoc to cause. It's the complete superhero experience, only slightly

undermined by the millions of other heroes hogging the limelight.

Five years of balancing, updates and DLC mean this should get off to a great start on Xbox One. We're excited to finally get a

// **DC UNIVERSE
ONLINE IS BIFF!
WHAM! POW!-ING
ONTO XBOX ONE//**

superhero MMO on Xbox, but now that the dev, Daybreak, has split from Sony, we'd be keen to see other Daybreak games too. *Planetside 2* (an MMOFPS, acclaimed for its epic space battles) and upcoming *H1Z1* (zombie

survival horror MMO) would be more than welcome on our console. Until then, who's your money on, Killer Moth or Mad Hatter? Wait, that's a great idea! Someone get Snyder on the phone!

IN NUMBERS > DATAPOINT: NEWS IN NUMBERS > DATAPOINT: NEWS IN NUMBERS

\$3,829,024

Total amount crowdfunded for *Pyschonauts 2*, over \$500,000 more than developer Double Fine was asking for.

6.6 MIL

Hours of Xbox One streamed to Windows 10 PCs. Sorry, televisions.

1 MIL+

Downloads of *Ark: Survival Evolved* in less than a week after it launched on Xbox One.

TICKET TO BROWN TOWN

THE HORROR! THE HORROR!

After *Alien: Isolation*, we hoped to see more first-person horror on Xbox One. A couple of years and satanic rituals later, these six upcoming games prove we're truly living in a golden age of scares



PERCEPTION

With *Beyond Eyes* hitting Xbox and now this, what is it with games about blindness looking so fantastic? Cassie, the game's heroine, traverses a mysterious estate through echolocation - a biological sonar used to identify objects through sound alone. *Perception* isn't above cheap jump scares and clichés, but its intriguing central mechanic, and a team consisting of ex-*BioShock* and *Dead Space* developers, make this well worth looking out for.



OUTLAST 2

A sequel usually has to be called something like *Pro Skater 6* to elicit whimpers of fear from us. Yet the idea of returning to *Outlast* sends shivers down our spine. The original game reminded us just how effective first-person horror could be. It took away guns and weapons and asked you to hide in a demented asylum of inmates so very keen to introduce themselves. Actually, we probably *can* wait to see what fresh hell *Outlast 2* is taking us to. Brrr.





We Happy Few coming to Game Preview

Compulsion Games' blissed-out survival sim - you're trying to escape clown-faced psychopaths in a drugged-up English village - will debut on the Xbox Game Preview program in mid-2016.

//THE IDEA OF RETURNING TO THE WORLD OF OUTLAST SENDS SHIVERS DOWN OUR SPINE - A SPINE WE'LL HOPEFULLY GET TO KEEP IN OUR BODY//



PHANTASMAL: CITY OF DARKNESS

Ghost houses are usually tightly scripted, so the idea of making a procedurally generated horror game that actually works is a scary enough prospect in itself. Set in Kowloon Walled City, this Lovecraftian adventure promises unique scares every time. Expect all of them to feature some truly unpleasant beasts - there's no drinking glass big enough to contain those big-eyed spiders.



SYNDROME

After a long cryosleep aboard your spaceship, you wake to discover the dead bodies of your crew. Explore the ship to piece together what happened and try to avoid a similar fate. Make too much noise, and you'll attract the attention of the ship's visitors. It's very *Alien: Isolation*, but has some gruesome ideas of its own. At one point you steal a corpse's arm. Presumably for some fingerprint-sensitive door, and not because you've resorted to cannibalism.



DRAUGEN

It's 1923 and an American has travelled to a desolate Norwegian village in search of his sister. *Draugen* uses first person to establish a haunting, isolated atmosphere, as you soon discover it's not just your sister who's missing. The whole village is deserted. Who's the mysterious woman in black? Why, when night falls, do you always hear a child creepily singing a lullaby? After a troubled development, we should get some answers soon.



ALLISON ROAD

Allison Road doesn't need a lunatic asylum to scare you - it's happy to bring the horror home. Walking around a normal house, you'd be forgiven for wondering if this was a horror game at all. Hang on, we don't remember scraping SIN and MURDER onto the bathroom walls. Then the lights cut out, the creepy music comes in and unknown entities start loudly knocking from behind slammed doors. By the time a voice hisses "I know where you are," we're getting nostalgic for that asylum.

Rumor & Speculation

The five biggest bits of gossip this month

1 *Scalebound* delayed as Kamiya tries to get a real dragon in it.

EXCITEMENT: 6/10

LIKELIHOOD: 9/10

2 *Quantum Break* reverts to old title: *Blinx the Timesweeper 3*.

EXCITEMENT: 10/10

LIKELIHOOD: 4/10

3 Next *Assassin's Creed* is set in Hollywood, where you must kill off anyone who criticized the new movie.

EXCITEMENT: 6/10

LIKELIHOOD: 7/10

4 *Mankind Divided* not delayed, according to the chips in our brains.

EXCITEMENT: 6/10

LIKELIHOOD: 8/10

5 *Sea of Thieves* is where Rare keeps bodies of those who pirated *Replay*.

EXCITEMENT: 3/10

LIKELIHOOD: 10/10



THIS MONTH:

HOW TO MAKE AN ANIME INTO THE ULTIMATE FIGHTING GAME

Hiroshi Matsuyama and Miho Nakagawa on how Xbox One awakens Naruto's powerful final form



Fireballs now cause splash damage, dealing out hurt over time. Can Naruto use shuriken instead? Sure he can!

1 USE NEW-GEN POWER

On Xbox 360, there was only one-on-one fighting in the game. *Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja Storm 4* has the Leader Change system – three characters are playable in one battle. Xbox One's power helps us do things we weren't able to do before. In Free Battle, fighting against another player's team of three, all six characters can activate Awakening... oh my god! That was impossible on 360!

2 STAY TRUE TO THE ANIME

Storm 4 has new, better elements like the Leader Change system, because in the original manga and anime, all the fighting is done that way. In the *Naruto* series, the ninjas are fighting as a team of three – Naruto, Sasuke and Sakura. They're not only fighting individually, but also supporting each other. We wanted to successfully reproduce that dynamic in the game.

3 CRANK UP THE DRAMA

It's a different kind of quality. There are lots of graphical effects: more particles in there when the costumes burn, and light effects, too. We've never created this kind of detail before – these techniques deliver a new game experience to long-time players.

4 PACK IT WITH CONTENT

Storm 4 has lots of volume and content in it. You have over 100 playable characters, and you have the *Naruto* storyline right up until the end of the series, and you have various boss battles, and you have Adventure Mode, you have Online Mode, and you have different costumes and characteristics for each playable character.

5 MAKE THE FIGHTERS UNIQUE

Each of the 100 playable characters is different. We use animations for some characters that we're not using at all for others. Each time we make new characters we do that: we build up each from scratch. If players want to try to find out how to use every character, we hope they take their time and enjoy it!

6 LISTEN TO FANS...

Fans all over the world have given us feedback. On the CyberConnect2 website, there's a forum where users can comment; we read and analyze lots of feedback and check what are the major things that players want. We find out whether it's possible to create in-game – if not, why? – and we adjust things as much as we can to answer their demands.

BACKGROUND CHECK

NAMES Hiroshi Matsuyama and Miho Nakagawa

JOB TITLES CEO of CyberConnect2 and producer at Bandai Namco

BIOS Japanese development studio CyberConnect2 is best known for its *Naruto* fighting games. President and CEO Hiroshi Matsuyama also worked on games such as *Asura's Wrath* and *SoulCalibur V*.

Miho Nakagawa is a producer at Bandai Namco who worked with Matsuyama on *Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja Storm Revolution* back in 2014. During interviews, the two often cosplay as the anime's main characters, Naruto and Sakura.

7 ...BUT WELCOME NEWCOMERS

In Adventure Mode there's a system called Fragment of Memory, so people can find out what happened in the past. This means new players can discover the history of the *Naruto* series, then go back to Story Mode and experience the story fully. They can enjoy playing this game – we can say it's for everyone.

8 FIGHT YOUR OWN BATTLES

The storyline covers up to the end of the *Naruto* manga series, and it will include everything from it. But besides that, we have Adventure Mode. It gives the player a controllable character, and the freedom to leave the village, meet new characters, and complete missions and quests. What's more, that all takes place after the end of the manga episodes.

9 OVERCOME OBSTACLES

Developing each part of each element – that's fine. The difficult bit is integrating all the assets. We need to balance every single thing perfectly. If something is unbalanced, we have to adjust everything again. Until that last moment of development, it's so tough, lots and lots of work! But after those difficulties, we're now close to our goal of completing this game.

10 KEEP THINKING OF THE FUTURE

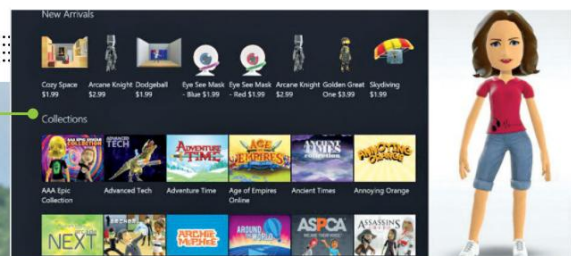
The latest *Naruto* movie, the *Boruto* movie, is part of the new generation of *Naruto*: new characters and elements are coming in. The *Naruto* world is still expanding worldwide, even though the manga has ended. We're honored to be part of that. Maybe after the release of *Storm 4* – if we get the chance – we can consider something new for the future... **OXM**



Burnout creators turn to Golf

Three Fields Entertainment, a studio formed by ex-Criterion devs, debuts in May with a mad cross between *Burnout's* Crash mode and golf.

DASHBOARD



The Avatar store is back. Browse through what's available, buy some random stuff...

Join party

- Doctor Hoot Archie Stra...
Forza Motorsport 6 - In th...
- EffortlessOwl
Forza Motorsport 6 - In th...
- lamInigo
Forza Motorsport 6 - In th...
- Forward Viper
Forza Motorsport 6 - In th...
- Louis XXVII
Halo 5: Guardians - WarZone

XBOX: COMMUNITY EVOLVED

Leaderboards! Avatars! Dashboard improvements on Xbox One...

Wondering what everyone is up to? You can now see who's in a party before you join it.

Last November, the Xbox One Dashboard got a dramatic facelift, freeing it from its slavish devotion to making every neat function a self-contained app, and in the process making navigation a brighter and breezier experience. But if you think Microsoft is done improving the console's operating system, then man, you don't know Microsoft!

Anyone who's on the Xbox One Preview program should already be enjoying the latest tweaks to the Dashboard as you read this. Slightly less dramatic than the November metamorphosis, the updates aim to smooth out some of the crinkles arising from the previous update. This being the case, one of the additions we're most excited about is actually a reinstated feature: the return of the

30-day Gamerscore leaderboards, which allows you to track your progress against your friends and see who's gone on a *Telltale* binge in a sad attempt to scale the rankings. (Hi, Matthew.)

Other changes improve Dashboard functionality in small but still significant ways: you'll be able to see who's in a Party before joining, and if your friends are broadcasting a game over Twitch, you'll be able to launch straight to the feed via either the game tile or the game hub.

Speaking of tiles, the update brings excellent news for neat freaks: you'll now be able to rearrange your pinned

tiles manually from the Dashboard (where previously they could only be organised efficiently via the SmartGlass app), and remove detritus such as apps, betas, and demos from your installation list.

Perhaps the biggest news coming out of the latest announcement, however, is the new Xbox News service, which will beam the latest info about games releases, updates, and eSports

tournaments direct to your activity feed. All this, and we haven't even had time to mention the return of the Avatar store. So: the Avatar store is returning, with all that previously-purchased content you love. Enjoy!

//REARRANGE YOUR PINNED TILES AND REMOVE DETRITUS SUCH AS DEMOS//

YOU'RE FIRED! > QUOTES OF THE MONTH > BLAH BLAH > HE SAID WHAT? > YADDA

"We felt 'How about we do something where we throw the rulebook away?' Because let's be honest: golf is boring, golfers are boring."

Three Fields founder Alex Ward, talking to V6247, sells *Dangerous Golf* to non-golfers.

"EVERYBODY wants single player DLC... I know NOTHING about that."

After Franklin's voice actor is seen posing in a Rockstar office in motion caption gear, Michael De Santa actor Ned Luke is keen to shut down some *GTA V* rumours.

"I want to thank Harold for his friendship, passion, hard work, and dedication in helping make Bungie the great company it is today."

New Bungie CEO Pete Parsons on Harold Ryan, who left after *Destiny 2* was delayed until 2017.

DASHBOARD

HEROES HALF SHELLACKED

BROTHERS IN ARMS

Leonardo, the turtles' leader, is brave, smart and wields two katanas, just like Da Vinci would have wanted. But Donatello is the brains of the outfit - a scientist, inventor and technological genius. Not bad for a so-called teenager.

JUMPING THE SHARK

Elsewhere in the trailer we meet Armaggon. A mutant shark from the future and enemy of the turtles, he has ambitions to conquer the world. Good to know the future is even scarier than we imagined. We should probably start bombing the ocean.

WORTH SHELLING OUT FOR?

Platinum releases radical new details of its Turtles brawler

The good Platinum giveth, and the bad Platinum taketh away. The same month it breaks our hearts with a *Scalebound* delay, it also properly announces (after many leaks) its new *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* game. We were so devastated about *Scalebound* slipping to 2017, we nearly kerb-stomped a petting zoo's worth of turtles in revenge.

But that would have been a mistake, as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutants in Manhattan* looks like another excellent Platinum brawler. Like last year's fantastic *Transformers Devastation*, it also echoes the style and spirit of a beloved '80s cartoon and ignores the more recent Michael Bay rehash. If reversing Mr Bay's handiwork is Platinum's new

business model, we're all for it. (Just kidding. Hurry up and finish *Scalebound*.)

Cel-shaded graphics perfectly capture the iconic *TMNT* look, but Platinum has made sure the colourful fan-service isn't just skin-deep. Tom Waltz, one of the lead writers on the *TMNT* comic book, is writing the story, and seems determined to cram in as many iconic villains as possible. We'll be protecting New York from "aliens, mutants, and the Foot clan." Each turtle will have a distinct combat style and customizable ninjitsu moves, which we're willing to take on trust from the developers of *Bayonetta*'s ever-shifting fighting styles. The studio knows what it's doing, so long as what it's doing isn't phoning in another *The Legend of Korra*.

Much as *TMNT* reminds us of *Devastation*, Platinum hasn't become an acclaimed studio by simply repeating itself. The inclusion of four-player online co-op is what has us really excited, especially as we still know little about the four-player capabilities of *Scalebound*. Could this be something of a test run for the larger game? A lonesome fight in *Bayonetta* or *Devastation* is mad enough alone, so the idea of four players dashing and smashing across screens simultaneously at the usual insane Platinum pace could leave us feeling as green as our heroes. *Mutants in Manhattan* comes to Xbox One and Xbox 360 this summer, just in time for a sequel to the awful 2014 film to hit cinemas. We'd sooner complete *Bayonetta* with our eyes shut before watching that.



More-hammer on Xbox

Warhammer 40,000: Eternal Crusade is coming to Xbox One in the summer. In this MMO FPS you play as Orks, Eldar, Space Marines and Chaos Space Machines in battles on the planet of Arkhona.



THE WHOLE HOG

A cast of big-name (by *TMNT* standards) bads await. Bebop, a mutant warthog, is cocky enough to think he can pull off shades indoors. "Time to smash some shells!" he squeals in the trailer. We'd have a cockier comeback if he wasn't armed with a flaming chainsaw.

RHINO-MIGHT!

Everyone needs a partner in crime. Bonnie & Clyde. Thelma & Louise. Donald Trump & his hairdresser. Bebop's is Rocksteady, a mutant white rhinoceros. He's dumb, but who needs smarts when you have supreme rhino strength?

A PARTY DUDE

Michelangelo wields dual nunchucks and is the most laid back, the "comic relief" of the group, best known for his love of pizza. Wait, who doesn't love pizza? Violent, aggressive Raphael is practically the opposite - perfect for a Platinum brawler.

HOW TO SPEAK DEVELOPER

Your guide to translating those interview gems

"This is for the players."

Yep, that's how we're marketing games now. We'd sell a movie as "This is for the people with eyes."

"Admittedly there are a lot of zombie games on the market, but our commitment to innovation ensures we stand out from the crowd."

Did I not mention they're also Nazis?

"We've been inspired by the episodic release model. It means our audience has to wait less time to play our games."

Which developer inspired our release dates for episodes? That would be Valve.

"We didn't want to just rehash the last game. That would've been easy. Making a groundbreaking sequel is far more challenging, and we love a challenge!" Today's challenge: rehashing our last game for the sequel, then claiming that we didn't.

DASHBOARD

UPDATES - NEW INFO ON THE BIG GAMES

PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX / DEVELOPER SQUARE ENIX / FORMAT XBOX ONE / ETA TBC 2016

FINAL FANTASY XV

Our fantasy is actually getting to play the thing

Is this the 15th time FFXV has been here?

It's been in Development Hell so long it's been promoted to vice-Beelzebub. But it's finally coming out this year and its director, Hajime Tabata, is talking about game mechanics instead of harping on about feelings.

Prove it.

Challenge accepted. With the switch from FF's usual

static battles to action-oriented combat, things have had to change. While your party will still raise its stats through fighting, Tabata's also explained that certain actions will form a "second thread" of leveling, which will boost specific combo attacks.

So, half-Final Fantasy, half-Skyrim?

The Elder Scrolls might be a touchstone in more

ways than one. It also sounds as though there'll be some control over how your party develops. Tabata's mentioned that heading to different regions not only brings new enemies, but new ways skills can develop.

Turning your characters into different kinds of mage, for example?

That's not yet entirely clear, although Tabata's

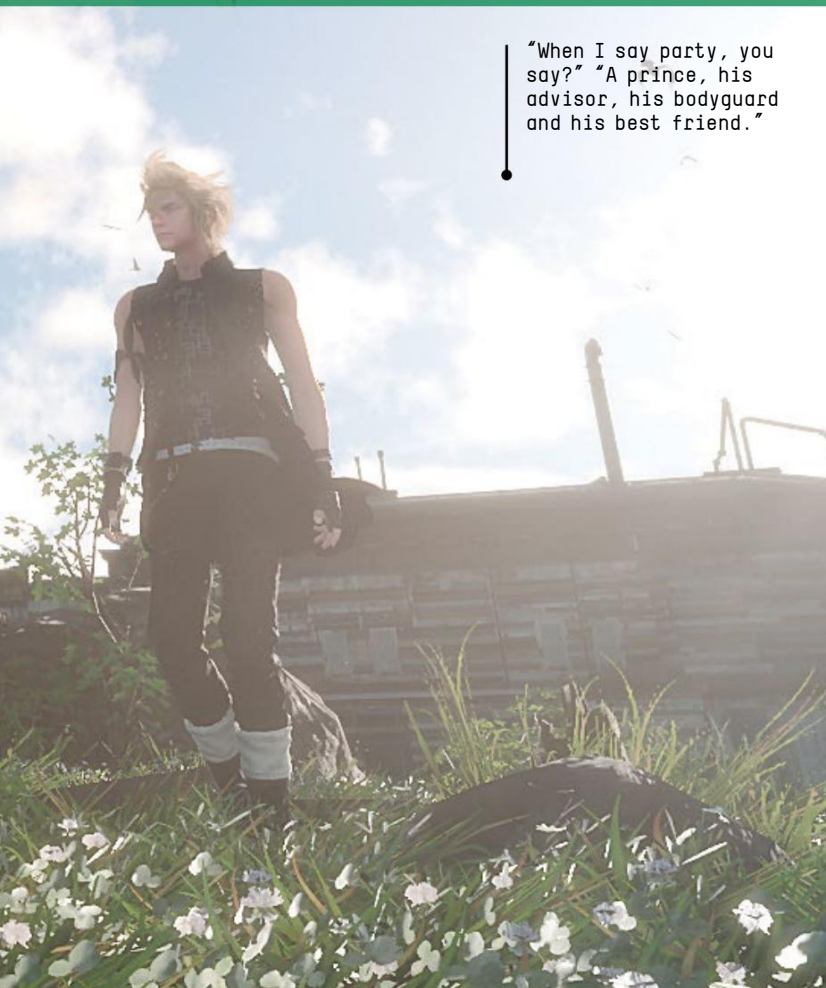
been keen to point out that magic types aren't just a tool here, but a clue to the characters' backstories. Our protagonist, Noctis, is a prince, and his style of magic (the 'flying around the battlefield like a souped-up squirrel' style) is only available to the royal family, whereas his commoner chum, Prompto, only has access to basic spells.

Hey, you got social commentary in my RPG!

You got RPG in my social commentary! Wait, that doesn't work. Either way, the developers are trying to push *Final Fantasy* forward, and that means giving it a story that isn't just some insanity about a magical spirit whale. That said, I do hope I get to fight one of those. They'd be fun to slaughter in real-time.

UPDATE





"When I say party, you say?" "A prince, his advisor, his bodyguard and his best friend."



UPDATE

Mack's consciousness can be swapped into any empty robot, presumably changing its abilities each time.

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS / DEVELOPER ARMATURE STUDIO /
FORMAT XBOX ONE / ETA TBC 2016

RECORE

Waiting even longer for
the end of the world

Wasn't this meant to be coming out soon?

Yes. It's been delayed. I'm sorry. The team-up between *Mega Man* creator Keiji Inafune and *Metroid Prime* creator Armature has been pushed back into the latter half of this year. Hopefully that at least means we'll see some real gameplay pop up soon, given that we're still going on just a few interviews and a CG trailer.

What do we actually know?

In a post-apocalyptic world, humans are almost extinct, and two factions of robots war over whether to bring us back. But as for the game itself, we're thinking it's a third-person action adventure, but the devs have stayed tight-lipped.

Those are some pretty great developers, though.

Yes indeed, and now there's

another star name involved in the project. *ReCore*'s writer is former Bungie stalwart Joseph Staten. He wrote *Halo 3: ODST*, directed *Halo*'s cinematics, managed its extended universe and went on to help create *Destiny*. Now he's taking the lead on the story of Joule, our human protagonist, and Mack, the ball-shaped consciousness that powers her robot companions.

Sounds like we can expect a good story.

Here's hoping! The most intriguing part seems to center on the brain-spheres in the robots. Not only is it a great puzzle mechanic in the making, but the devs have mentioned a hidden, true nature. My guess is they're the stored consciousnesses of all the long-dead humans. We'll have to wait and see on that one.



Here's a shadowy line-up of potential Mack forms.

DASHBOARD

UPDATES - NEW INFO ON THE BIG GAMES

UPDATE

To be honest, we don't think an animal with no discernible head is worth trying to ride.

PUBLISHER FOCUS HOME INTERACTIVE / DEVELOPER SPIDERS / FORMAT XBOX ONE / ETA 2016

THE TECHNOMANCER

He's electric, he's on a planet where evil's genetic

Technomancer? Is that someone who resurrects dead iPads?

Well, it is what I will be calling all Apple Store employees from now on. But in this case, it is an angry man from the future with a big stick and quasi-magical electricity powers, on the run from the Secret Police and locked in a struggle to survive on a terraformed, out-of-control Mars.

Wow. That sounds a bit intense.

It does. That said, it's a follow-up to Xbox 360 RPG *Mars: War Logs*, which wasn't so much "intense" as it was "a bit guff." But *that* said, Spiders is well-known for making games that overreach rather than simply fail, and *War Logs* fit that bill. Here's hoping this can build on those good ideas and jettison the problems.

So what actually is it?

A post-*Mass Effect* RPG – all cooldown abilities, action combat, story-altering conversations and companion relationships. Protagonist Zachariah is actually a Technomancer in training, and guess who's in charge of making sure he meets his full potential by making your way along several skill trees? That's right, buddy – it's you.

What can this guy do?

So, there are four groupings of abilities to choose from. Three are fighting styles, enabling you to approach combat in different ways, building buffs and covering weaknesses. The fourth is Zachariah's burgeoning Technomancer abilities, a range of electricity-based attacks that can be used for anything from crowd control to stealth.

So which poor schmucks are getting all of this thrown at them?

Seemingly, everyone on Mars. As we said, Zachariah's on the run from the Secret Police, but there are more horrifying opponents to face, too. Part of the terraforming process included creating an ecosystem, but Mars' new wildlife evolved more into predator than prey. It means you'll be facing up against swarms of half-bug, half-Venus-flytrap horrors, then wandering into an arena inhabited by a single beetle-thing. Except it's the size of a McDonalds restaurant. Hopefully, that'll make for on-the-fly tactical play as you work out how to take down mega-monstrosities without getting stomped. Spiders is reaching for the stars again – let's hope it works this time.



Combat looks deep, but animations are shonky right now. Let's have them cleaned up, eh?



"Okay, so we've managed to get our collective asses to Mars. Now what?"

We've upgraded

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Messages

Love letters, death threats, and some stuff about games... your comments on the mag and on Xbox

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If some of your mad game ideas start taking effect, 2016 will be the most bizarre year Xbox has ever seen. This month's range from the great (more games set in the future!) to the special (abandon 3D and make all games 2D!) to the truly odd (stop giving us good deals on old games!).



Alien Low Priceolation

I'm not ashamed to admit it. Last year I BEGGED for a new copy of *Alien: Isolation* for my then-new Xbox One. Oh, I got the game, but only after hours of chores, favors and promises to be good for a whole year (a promise unkept, but what can you do?). It was an amazing game and my sacrifice had been totally worth it... until I saw the recent sales on the Xbox One marketplace. Only seven dollars and fifty cents for *Isolation*?! What the hell? It's only a year old! What's the point of buying new games at launch if they're going to be practically free a few months later?

Damien Harden

Brilliant as *Alien: Isolation* was, sales were sadly below Sega's expectations. Shame, as we'd love to see a sequel. At least for that price more people got to play this horror masterpiece, right?

A (battle)cry for help

I fear I've hit peak Star Wars. I got *Fallout 4* and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* for Christmas, both unopened. All that's sat in my Xbox One disc slot is *Battlefront*, played until the early hours of the morning every night. I don't even know if I still even like

the game any more, I just can't stop hitting rematch, can't stop being inside Star Wars. Maybe it's time for me to turn the console off and return to this galaxy. I'm just not sure I can...

Rick Tilburg

You've come to us for help with your *Battlefront* addiction? That's like visiting a brewery for tips on quitting drinking. We'll do our best to help – by blasting you in the back on Jakku until you rage quit. You're welcome.

2D or not 2D?

I tried *Assassin's Creed Chronicles* recently and actually preferred a 2D *Assassin's* game – it was far more focused than *Syndicate*. Maybe its time more 3D games went 2D. How about a Metroidvania-style *Halo* game – all the fun of exploring, mixed with the best shooting in gaming.

I'd definitely snap up a remake of *Grand Theft Auto V*, done in the top down style of classic *GTA*. Face it, it's time 3D took a hike.

Angela Vinken

Why stop there? Maybe some 2D greats should be in 3... actually, no. We just imagined some of *Kalimba's* beasts in three dimensions. No sleep for us.

Star Letter

Prize: Star Wars Battlefront

The best piece of correspondence wins a game from Matthew's goody bag

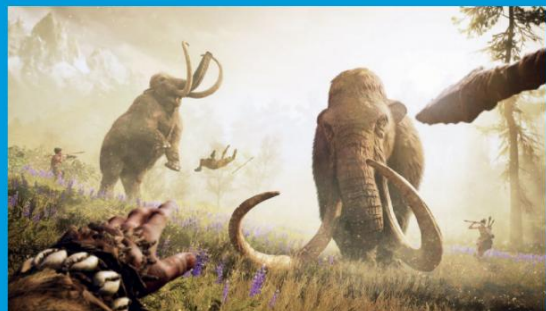


STOP PLAYING IN THE PAST

I've liked *Far Cry* ever since I learnt to stab people in the throat in 3 [charming – Ed] and I'll probably snap up *Far Cry Primal*. But don't we have enough open-world games set in the past? I've explored Rome, America during the revolution, Olde London Tahn... I want developers to show me the future. How about climbing skyscrapers that go all the way to space? Or exploring the next *GTA* sandbox via flying car? I know I'd be more excited for *Far Cry 3000*.

Katherine Barret

Two things. 1) Sounds like you need *Mirror's Edge Catalyst*. 2) Does the future have *Primal's* killer owls? No? Not interested.



YOUR VOTE

WHICH XBOX ONE EXCLUSIVE DO YOU WANT A SEQUEL TO?

ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST
The new forest spirits born in the game leave the door wide open for a sequel with expanded powers and abilities.

RYSE: SON OF ROME
Crytek has said *Ryse* isn't a one-off title, but given the events of the game any sequel would need a new hero.

SUNSET OVERDRIVE – 61%
RYSE – 27%
ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST – 8%
D4: DARK DREAMS – 4%
DON'T DIE – 4%

SUNSET OVERDRIVE
Insomniac's energy drink-based shooter can get repetitive, so a sequel that opens a can of new ideas would be welcome.

Social Services

Under-rated gems: the great games that don't get the adulation they deserve...



Wolfenstein: The Old Blood – just as great as *New Order* and very affordable for its length. Should get more attention. – **Dillon Donnelly**



So Many Me. Excellent puzzles challenge and it has a lot of personality. – **Daniel Dunn**



Elite Dangerous. Huge game with massive potential for all budding space exploration fans like myself. Also very cheap for a game so big. – **Derrick Byrne**



Elder Scrolls Online. It's kinda off-putting due to the vastness of the game. But once you figure it out it's a whole lot of fun. Especially PvP. – **Steven Sardia**



Evolve. There's just no other game like it, and it's tons of fun. – **Guy Pitts**



I have to say *Ori and the Blind Forest*. It's by far the best exclusive. – **Sean Mesler**



I thought *Ryse: Son of Rome* was a really good game. Bit repetitive, but highly different and better graphics from most coming out now. – **Paul Hanson**



Super Ultra Dead Rising 3' Arcade Remix Hyper Edition EX + Alpha. Seriously, best DLC ever! – **Josh Wittels**



Sunset Overdrive. A good old classic run and gun completely over the top awesome fest. – **Jordan Micklewright**



Dead Rising 3. What a phenomenal game. At launch, that game was the reason to own the Xbox One. – **Cameron Alan Jones**

The Annotated... Scalebound

Your thoughts on Platinum delaying the game to 2017



It's good to see Microsoft pushing back games to let them develop into great games.
Lewis Steven Gray

This sucks but it'll be worth it if they release a quality game. Eventually.
Scott O'Connor

Microsoft still has exclusives planned this year. Personally I'd rather have a better product in the end.
Edward Peplinski

I thought I couldn't have my heart broken again. Looks like I was wrong.
Kenneth Miller

FEATURE



Words: Tom Stone

A promotional image for the video game Quantum Break. It features a character in a white and orange tactical suit with a helmet, holding a large, complex weapon. The character is in a dynamic pose, appearing to be in the middle of an action sequence. The background is a chaotic, industrial environment with smoke, fire, and debris. The overall aesthetic is high-tech and action-oriented.

QUANTUM BREAK

TIME DIES WHEN YOU'RE HAVING FUN

Remedy finally lets us go hands-on with Quantum Break and witness the evolution of bullet time in 2016's first essential game

Jack Joyce gets out of the cab and steps onto the grounds of Riverport University. It's 4am, but there's no way we're turning back. We march toward the university building, ignoring the posters, graffiti and ridiculously high level of detail on campus. We ignore Amy, the friendly student protesting the destruction of the university library, and regretfully ignore the mysterious man lurking in the shadows. We've waited since 2013 to finally experience the time-twisting mechanics of *Quantum Break*, and not even the usual Remedy commitment to world building, hidden collectables and secrets is going to stop us now.

It's the first game from the studio since 2012's *Alan Wake's American Nightmare*, the limits of its acclaimed Xbox 360 series inspiring it to be more ambitious for its Xbox One debut. "One of the things which we knew early on is that there's this problem where players get fatigued with the mechanic," explains Kyle Rowley, lead game designer. "We have this one mechanic and we do it quite well but it's the same mechanic that we kind of repeat through the whole experience. So that was one of the first things that we were thinking about *Quantum* – we need to make sure that we have a more varied gameplay experience."

Blast from the past

But first a reunion, as Jack Joyce (*X-Men*'s Shawn Ashmore) meets up with his childhood friend, Paul Serene (*Game of Thrones*' Aidan Gillen). Serene had been working with Jack's brother, William (*Lost*'s Dominic Monaghan) on a top secret research project. But William has gotten cold feet, concerned investors are about to pull out, and Serene needs Jack's help.

Serene takes us down to his lab, where he and William have built what Serene claims is a real, working time machine. A huge construction that takes up the whole lab, it's far more impressive than your average police box or tricked out DeLorean. "We're trying to make the story believable," says Rowley, "not trying to go super sci-fi – it needs to be grounded in realism. That's why the time machine's a physically big thing that you walk around." A realistic, grounded story, then, but one Remedy knows has to be entertaining. "It's been challenging to come up with

mechanics which are fun to use and tie thematically into time travel, but are also grounded in reality," Rowley admits.

Serene then reveals why he invited Jack here. He wants Jack to test the time machine with him. At 4am. Secretly, and unsupervised. Impressively, we're in control for much of this. "We've tried to move as much of the storytelling to something where the player can move around and do whatever they want," says Rowley, explaining a lesson learnt from the cutscene-heavy *Alan Wake*. "So it was important for us in Act One, where you're activating the time machine, that that's something physically you can do."

Appreciate the trust, Kyle, but it may have been misplaced in us. As soon as Serene enters the machine, William

Monarch Drones, far deadlier than Amazon drones. Unless you've been buying grenades through Prime, we guess.



If you work for Monarch and are trying to earn a promotion, try not to drop your gun.

"IT'S A FAR MORE IMPRESSIVE TIME MACHINE THAN YOUR AVERAGE DELOREAN"



RELIVE THE NIGHTMARE

Following an excellent trend started by *Fallout 4* last year, backward compatibility means *Quantum Break* will come with a free downloadable copy of Xbox 360's *Alan Wake*, with both DLC packs included. A supernatural, psychological thriller, *Wake* is well worth playing, even if you only play it to understand the tons of callbacks and Easter eggs we spotted in *Break* (though *Wake*'s pitch-perfect *Twilight Zone* parody *Night Springs* is always deserving of a shout out). Pre-ordering also gets you a free copy of its downloadable sequel *Alan Wake's American Nightmare*. When you finally get through both of those, you won't have any time left to play *Quantum Break*. Ironically.

Strikers are resistant to your time powers. Time to panic.

shows up, armed with a handgun and demanding you stop the experiment, warning that it'll cause the end of time itself. The machine becomes unstable, and suddenly an explosion rocks the lab. This is the titular *Quantum Break*, a crack in the very fabric of time, and Jack has been hit with the full force of it. Armed militia burst in, working for the mysterious 'Monarch Solutions' (game director, Mikael Kasurinen, dubs them "the evil NASA"). Serene disappears into the time machine, as you and William begin a desperate escape.

Early impressions of *Quantum Break*'s more grounded approach had us worried we were in for more realistic shooting than we saw in *Max Payne*. But as we are making our escape, we shoot a Monarch soldier. We score our first headshot and the camera celebrates by sailing around the grunt's head in slow motion, showing him falling back as the bullet sends his corpse crashing to the floor. Completely OTT and brilliant for it, Remedy hasn't let realism get in the way of making a fun game.

"Kill cams are from *Max Payne* and we had them in *Alan Wake*," Rowley reminds us. "Those things are satisfying so we're



FEATURE

going to keep that in there. We consider ourselves a cinematic studio – not just in terms of how we tell the story cinematically but in our gameplay.”

Satisfying as it is, we don't have to settle for simple gunplay for long. William is shot at by Monarch, but Jack saves him by somehow freezing the bullets in mid-air. This is Time Stop, which Rowley calls “a focused bubble of time” that Jack can throw at enemies and obstacles, temporarily trapping them in a still moment. Empty a clip of SMG rounds into the bubble and they'll hover around the enemy. Three, two, one... and time restarts, the bullets perforating the Monarch grunt simultaneously from all directions. This feels fantastic, redefining the term ‘overkill’. And it's not even *Break's* most satisfying technique for taking out the enemy.

Tempus Fugitive

You'd be forgiven for assuming Time Dodge is a purely defensive move, but Rowley assures us that's far from its only purpose. “Jack rushes through time and the whole world slows around him,” explains Rowley. “He dodges through time very fast and as he comes out of the dodge he gets this almost bullet time effect. You can push back enemies and then headshot them with the pistol, or shotgun them in the face or whatever – it's pretty satisfying!”

Even more so when we get to try Time Rush, an extended version of Dodge, letting you run at impossible speeds. From the Monarch enemy's perspective, it appears as if you've disappeared. He looks around, bewildered, while you're stood behind him, aiming at the back of his head and smirking as you pull the trigger. This feels like Neo and Max Payne had a baby, and instead of resulting in a human so wooden you have to varnish him, we got the true next step for bullet time in shooters.

Then there's Time Shield, a temporary defense that pauses time around Jack. It has offensive capabilities, too – triggering the Time Shield near a Monarch employee sends them flying back as a force wave hits them. It makes you braver, more willing to run up to enemies instead of crouching behind cover. Remedy is determined to keep the pace up and it's been hugely effective. “Our key goals are that we wanted it to be accessible, direct and there should be this frantic pace as well,” explains Kasurinen. “You can just jump into it and have fun, that was very important to us.”

But that's only assuming you pull these moves off smoothly. If *Quantum*



Break really is a superhero origin story, your first hour will be the humiliating montage of learning your powers the hard way. We Time Rushed face-first into brick walls, threw balls of frozen time at inanimate objects and kept triggering Time Shield long after Monarch lackeys had finished filling us with bullets and were signing off for lunch. It's frustrating for the best of reasons – in the conservative shooter scene, rarely do we see so many new mechanics thrown at us.

Crucially, despite buzzing with these superhuman abilities, you rarely feel overpowered. Jack feels vulnerable in a firefight, with combat tough on Normal difficulty and mistakes quickly punished. Health regenerates, but this isn't a shooter that allows safety in cover. Monarch goons lob grenades, destroy the boxes you were kneeling behind or simply run around your defenses to take you out. In other single-player shooters this would feel unfair. With the time powers in your favor, any firefight with Jack versus a room full of goons is impressively well balanced.

“Okay, we'll let you go, just please use the walkway and don't hop the fe- OH GOD DAMN IT.”



"THIS IS THE
TRUE NEXT
STEP FOR
BULLET TIME
IN SHOOTERS"



Health regenerates,
but we don't recommend
running toward
gunfire face first.

SHOWTIME

WE FOLLOW THREE MAIN CHARACTERS AND STORYLINES IN QUANTUM BREAK'S FIRST LIVE-ACTION EPISODE, BUT ARE WE IN FOR THE NEXT BREAKING BAD, OR A LOAD OF OLD NIGHT TRAP?

MARTIN HATCH

We open the episode with the face of Monarch, Martin Hatch, calmly interrogating Amy, the student captured during the university raid. It's further proof that Lance Reddick (*The Wire*, *Fringe*) has enough intensity and dramatic chops to sell anything. The guy could've got pathos out of "you were almost a Jill sandwich", and the cold menace he displays here has us anticipating an in-game face off.

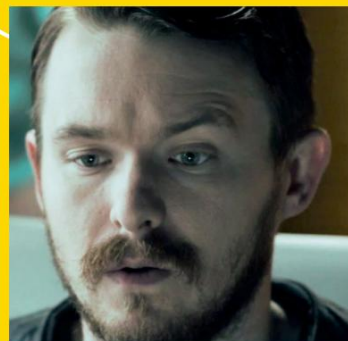


LIAM BURKE

Liam Burke is Monarch's security officer, assigned with finding a mole in the company. Burke gets a couple of fight scenes, which we'd ideally like to play, not watch. But we also briefly meet Burke's pregnant wife. Games almost never show us the home life of our foes. Here's hoping for an upcoming harrowing scene where Jack has to visit the families of all the Monarch grunts we happily gunned down in Act One.

CHARLIE WINCOTT

Charlie's in a surprisingly high amount of scenes seeing as he's something of a comic relief character. Watching the daily grind at a shady company is at least interesting, even if Charlie's potential romance with co-worker Fiona isn't. Still, Charlie shouldn't be underestimated - he can literally ruin a life with the touch of a button.



EPISODE 1 - THE OXM VERDICT

Good actors and production values helped sell us on putting down the controller and picking up the popcorn. But we're still not sold on long live-action scenes being mixed with such a fast-paced game. We'll be intrigued to see how the plot develops, especially if our in-game actions start having a bigger impact on future episodes.

FEATURE

Time Vision is the sole disappointment of the bunch, simply because it's the only power that doesn't feel fresh. It allows Jack to see enemy locations, collectables and other points of interest. Rowley openly admits it's similar to the Instinct mode in *Hitman*: "I think, thematically, Time Vision works quite well with us because Jack has these time powers so he can sense things slightly differently – so you can spot where enemies are, where hazards are and then we use that same mechanic for utilizing where collectables are."

We'd be lying if we claimed it wasn't useful for finding where we're supposed to go, who's still alive and what collectables we've missed – but Time Vision also highlights one of the weaker aspects of the game. Time manipulation puzzles open up a huge realm of platforming possibilities (*Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* proved that), but the odd clambering set-pieces we see are simplistic. Rewinding time to temporarily raise a platform, or using Time Stop to freeze one in mid-air. Neither of these puzzles are bad, just unchallenging.

Rowley explains that the main purpose of these sections was to make sure that even outside combat, the time powers never stray from the player's mind. "We try and reintroduce powers through puzzles that you may have forgotten about in combat and then you're like, 'Okay, I'll use that again when I'm in a combat situation'."

Act One concludes with a twist that'll be familiar to anyone who's been following *Quantum Break*. An older Paul Serene, one who's returned from the far future, reveals himself as the head of Monarch. "I'm sorry Jack," Serene says, an apology we'd be more willing to accept if it weren't followed by him using his time powers to knock us unconscious. Bundled into the back of a Monarch van, we won't be playing as Jack again for a long time. Game over?

Killin' with Gillen

Not exactly, as *Quantum Break* shifts perspectives, putting you in control of Paul Serene. It's a risky choice. There aren't many great games where you get to play as the villain (*Shadow the Hedgehog* anyone? A-anyone?),



Stop time, then fire away. We doubt we'll see a more satisfying kill this year.



HOLLYWOOD MAGIC

Having cast actors from hit TV shows like *Game of Thrones*, *Lost* and *Fringe*, Remedy is determined to get the most out of them, with *Quantum Break* featuring the most detailed facial capture we've seen since *L.A. Noire*. Apparently the secret to avoiding the uncanny valley is all in the eyes. Early CGI movies had a lot of trouble with eyes (notably in *The Polar Express*, a Christmas movie easily mistaken for a horror about dead-eyed souls trapped on a ghost train). Here eyes have a realistic quality, right down to how the pupils react to light. It's a small touch that makes a huge difference in humanizing these virtual actors. No zombies here.

Even exploding barrels feel fresh with time powers.

Here, Dominic Monaghan tries to work out exactly what happened in the final episode of *Lost*. Good luck, buddy.



"Try and guess my favorite color. Go on. I'll give you a hint: it's not yellow."



"THE CHOICES YOU MAKE WHILE PLAYING AS SERENE WILL HAVE A HUGE IMPACT ON THE STORYLINE"

especially ones where you're the hero as well. Surely it's inconsistent to play as Paul Serene, when our main motivation as Jack Joyce is fighting Monarch? "I could see that [as a] contradictory thing to allow the player to do that," acknowledges Kasurinen, "but we think it gives an interesting insight on what kind of choices the villain of the game is faced with."

"Actually, I think calling him a villain is simplifying things a lot because he's simply a person who's gotten through this traumatic experience. He knows what's at stake here and he understands what's coming and he has his own beliefs and thoughts on how to deal with that, how to survive that. He's thinking about humankind." Both parties' goal is to stop the end of time itself. Jack Joyce and Monarch Solutions simply have conflicting views of how to achieve that.

Playing as Serene, you learn that Monarch caught Amy, the leader of the protesters during the earlier university attack. You decide whether to have Amy killed, or use her for a smear campaign. "We put players into a situation where they have to make choices as Paul that have huge consequences on the storylines," explains Kasurinen, of the regular 'Junction Points' that'll appear

throughout the game. "It makes you complicit in a way in what the guys are doing that you're kind of fighting against on the game side."

Serene's time powers give him foresight, giving you a glimpse of both outcomes. Killing Amy means there's no one to validate Monarch's lie that they had nothing to do with the University attack. The public start distrusting Monarch, and siding with Jack Joyce. Allow Amy to live, however, and Monarch will force her to read a statement saying that Jack Joyce was to blame for the violence. The media and public will turn against Joyce, labeling him a terrorist. So in a clever touch, letting Amy live – the 'good' option – actually makes the game harder for Jack, upping the difficulty for yourself.

"Having an understanding of the possible consequences and seeing the drama around them [gives] the choice more weight," says Kasurinen, on the decision to show you the results of your choices in advance. "You see very clear, concrete things that will happen after you've made that choice and it gives more weight to it and makes the player more emotionally invested. So it's a way to make you feel like you're taking the weight of that decision as well."

"Make it quick. Painless," orders Serene, if you choose the Hardline option and have Amy killed. No wicked cackling or moustache-twirling. This is simply something Serene deems a necessary evil. He's a far more complex antagonist than we usually see in games. Of all the characters we've met so far, his story is easily the most intriguing. Plenty of games have experimented with implying that we might not be on the right side of the conflict, but rarely have we been this in the dark – we're not even sure if there is a 'good side' in this fight.

Changing with the times

After watching the first live-action episode (see Showtime, p33), we cut back to Jack escaping a Monarch van with ease, courtesy of a stutter – in-game moments where events are frozen, or moments happen over and over. As Kasurinen puts it, "time is breaking down". We were first introduced to stutters at Gamescom 2014, where we saw the time anomaly cause a ship to crash into a highway bridge, with cars repeatedly colliding in endless loops. "You get this visual effect and audio that gets stretched and twisted in different shapes,"

"TIME STUTTERS ARE EASILY *QUANTUM BREAK* AT ITS MOST ARRESTING"

explains Kasurinen. In one of Xbox One's most stunning-looking games, the stutters are easily *Quantum Break* at it's most visually arresting.

"A few years ago there was this 'bullet time plus', if you will," says Remedy art director and cinematic supervisor Saku Lehtinen, on the influence for the stutters. "Stuff started appearing in commercials where you had a long scene where the camera was going through a completely frozen scenario of multiple characters and events and explosions. So that was one of the inspirations. If we went even further into a tiny fraction of a moment and come to the essence of time, what would happen to the color gradings? Which parts of light would survive? How would the spectrum behave?"

Rowley sees stutters as not just a new challenge for the player, but a way of breaking up the action, creating a more varied, better paced

Overwhelmed? Time Rush around the enemy, then take them out from behind.

adventure – "Rather than just have 'combat! combat! combat!' With a few story sequences, we wanted to break that up a bit, and kind of allow us to use time powers in different, interesting ways. So we have these adventure-y sequences. And they don't all necessarily take place in this crazy environment where things are breaking around you. There are often quiet times where you can maneuver around the space to try and find your way to a different area, then often those times will have puzzles where you have to use some of your time abilities."

As time starts returning to normal, we're forced back into combat. But now we have learned the core mechanics, Remedy can begin to ramp up the challenge. It introduces Strikers, Monarch foes kitted out in armor resistant to our powers. When you first Time Stop a white-armored Striker, only for them to Time Rush out of the bubble, it's hard not to panic. Now you're up against foes who demand sharp shooting skills without your slowdown safety net you're forced to suddenly rework your strategies.

Rendering one of your powers somewhat useless does slightly dampen the power fantasy, but it's also an effective way of ensuring you're keeping all your skills in check. Mastering the aim of Time Stop is no good if you're still Time Rushing straight into gunfire.

Time Vision may be the most generic power on offer, but knowing where enemies are is crucial no matter

how good your shooting aim. *Quantum Break* isn't so much a test of mastering powers as it is of mastering each new space you're forced to fight in.

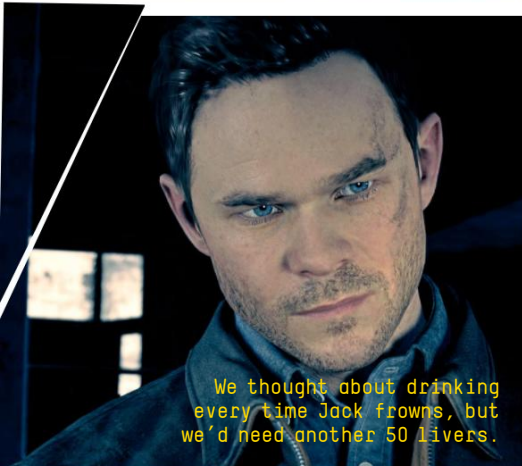
We caught ourselves mentally adapting to each new area. Is cover solid enough to be relied on? Should we use Time Stop to get the jump on the first enemy? Is it worth Time Rushing to a dropped SMG. It's a sign of strong mechanics that even the slightest environmental tweak can require a tactical shift – even if we do spend a bit too much of our demo shooting in warehouses. Beautiful, new-gen, dynamically-lit warehouses, but warehouses nonetheless. Snooping through Monarch emails hints at more exciting locales to come – a Monarch staff party on a ship has Titanic-esque set-piece written all over it.

That we still have two months to wait for that party is outrageous – especially now we've finally had a taste of Xbox One's most secretive exclusive. Rarely have we seen so much of a game, yet been left with so many questions. What is Paul Serene trying to achieve? Who is the mole in Monarch trying to help you? Should we be making choices that help Serene, or help Jack? Why isn't Lance Reddick a movie star? Which Remedy game has the best mix of gameplay, gunplay and cinematic storytelling? We're pretty confident that we're looking at the answer. It took 15 years for us to get a worthy successor to bullet time. Amazingly, it might just have been worth the wait.





Armored grunts absorb far more firepower. A mix of shotgun blasts and Time Rush escapes usually works.



We thought about drinking every time Jack frowns, but we'd need another 50 livers.



A QUESTION OF TIME

CREATIVE DIRECTOR SAM LAKE
ON STOPPING THE CLOCK

OXM What was the initial thought process behind putting time powers in the player's hands?

Sam Lake Time powers have been a long, iterative process. We obviously have gunplay and combat mechanics in there, but we really wanted to find a nice mix of time powers for the player that would elevate it into something more than your average cover shooter and encourage the player into a more hectic experience. That was part of the motivation.

Also, from that perspective, we just wanted to create a game that would have much more variety and depth when it comes to your strategic combat choices and the action element than any previous Remedy game has had.

We wanted to throw in some small tweaks for the player with the upgrades to the time powers as well. So we've been prototyping a lot of different powers along the way, and as we're prototyping some of it worked really well and obviously we wanted those powers in the game. Some of it worked out, er, not so well and we abandoned a lot of ideas.

OXM What powers didn't work?

SL There were experiments on things like rewinding time mechanics. I mean we had some of that on the puzzle side, but we were trying it more in the combat. That obviously slows things down and gives it a different feel, where we just wanted really hectic, cinematic action.

We've been building A.I. related to all of these powers. So all of these powers, in one way or another, get a reaction from these enemies. More often than not, they're also an element for you to mess with them - because they don't have time powers, they get confused when you're using time powers. If they're frozen and then released, if you have moved around, they assume you are where you were and have disappeared, and it's the same with Time Dodge and Time Rush. They try and find you after that, so there is an added strategic element.

On top of all of this, we have special trick areas where you can mess with the timelines - most often rewinding the timeline of a specific object in a limited area. This is a puzzle mechanic, where you can interact with the environment.

OXM Can you give us an example?

SL If you break something in the environment by shooting at it and making it explode, and it's in this trick area, then you can use your time power to rewind it back to its original state. This doesn't stick for long, but for getting from one place to another, sometimes it's essential. If something breaks, then you'll need to rewind it, then you need to be fast enough to get across before it breaks again.

More on the story level, under certain conditions - when time freezes or breaks in the stutter moment - there is an option for Jack to unfreeze certain characters so they can maneuver in that stutter state as well. As you saw early on with his brother Will.



Poor fella. No one ever gets time frozen in a dignified position, do they?

FEATURE



Jack shoots at a Monarch employee, who looks like he thinks he's in *Just Dance 2016*.

OXM The time powers and the shooting are incredibly satisfying, but what we've seen of the story is very grounded. We guess people weren't sure if it was going to be power fantasy or stretch more towards realism. How did you get the balance right?

SL Yeah. It's tricky. Having fun and having that power fantasy – in some ways *Quantum Break* is kind of a superhero story and a superhero origin story at that. If you think about how the story goes, there is

a dash of classic Spider-Man origin story in there. If you look at Spider-Man – everyman, this young guy ends up being in the wrong place at the wrong time – or vice versa, depending on how you look at it! – you know, science experiment, spider bites him, he gets not time powers, but super powers. Then he is struggling to master his powers and also struggling to grow up into the hero he needs to be.

If you think about *Quantum Break*, Jack is kind of your everyman, with a dash of attitude. We have the science

experiment and things go wrong, and when these things go wrong he's partly to blame, so there is a sense of guilt, and with that comes the responsibility of fixing it. He's blasted with energy, he gains his time powers and you know his powers are growing through the experience. As the player learns to use one power, then you're getting a new power, then you're getting upgrades and it keeps on evolving as you gain Jack's powers through the experience.

For us at Remedy, we wanted to keep it grounded on some level. It would be easy to abandon that and go as far into any direction in which you have ideas, but we feel that there is value in keeping that real world sensibility in there. Because in some ways it also makes it more believable and more satisfying, because you can very easily get lost in that fantasy.

OXM There's merit in keeping it relatable.

SL Yes. It could be me, in a way, and there is that side of it. So it is a balancing act and working on it, trying things out, there is the pendulum effect of going too far in one direction and making a course correction back. We still have some time and we're still iterating on the time powers and balancing them,



Extensive motion capture was used to make the game as cinematic as possible.



QUANTUM BREAK

Jack stops time and prepares to shoot this marketing stiff, after he suggested delaying the game to 2018.

making sure the player is motivated to try out different strategies and different balances. So you don't just end up using one power or powers, but exploring the mix of it.

OXM The pacing is really strong throughout, but there are going to be live-action sections. How do you keep the pace up knowing there's going to be 20 minute-plus sections where you're telling players not to touch the controller? Is there any concern you could lose them in that time?

SL [Laughs] I kind of feel with the show we're in a fortunate position to begin with, because it's live-action. You're used to just watching TV, so you expect it, and I feel that makes it easier. I also feel that just from the perspective it is episodic in pacing throughout the game, just like we did with *Alan Wake* and even pushing it further in some ways.

Playing through an act of the game always ends with a junction scene where you take control of Paul Serene, who has the junction power. In a good TV series you always have a really tasty cliffhanger, and a junction moment is our game version of that cliffhanger. You are in control and you make a choice and, in that interactive fashion, create the cliffhanger for yourself.

"QUANTUM BREAK IS A KIND OF SUPERHERO STORY, AND A SUPERHERO ORIGIN STORY AT THAT"

Then the [episode of the] show you see afterwards immediately has consequences based on your choice. Just from the perspective of where we have the show appear and how we've shot a lot of alternate content it makes it more personal, it makes it much more your thing and that does something different. Junction by junction you're crafting your *Quantum Break* timeline and your *Quantum Break* universe and your version of the show.

OXM It's hard enough for most games to come up with one satisfying story and ending, what's it like trying to come up with several?

SL That's what we were agreeing on early in the project. We wanted to bring in player choice, but we were also really mindful that, ultimately, this is still going to be one story. Jack's hero journey, it has a set beginning and a set ending - we don't have multiple endings. At the same time, along the way you're making choices: you're affecting the set-up

and situations of certain scenes, you're part of an ensemble TV series cast deciding the fate of multiple characters along the way. But from the perspective of playing Jack's choice, it's still, on a skeleton level, one story. Based on your choices it's told many ways and with many outcomes, but it's still one story. Because we definitely agree [with your question]. Just making a very good story that resonates and a path of different consequences leading to the end is important.

But pacing wise the last episode of the show actually ends before the game ends. The last episode of the show leads you to the final act of the game. From the perspective of the show, there kind of are multiple endings, there are certain point-of-view characters featured in the show and you get to decide their fates very conclusively through your choices. Depending on how that goes, that flows into the final act of the game, while Jack's journey very much has a set conclusion. ■

PUBLISHER KOCH MEDIA / DEVELOPER DAMBUSTER STUDIOS / FORMAT XBOX ONE

Homefront: The Revolution

It's not quite a revolution, but the new Homefront is a dab hand with a shapeshifting gun

Homefront: *The Revolution* has seen tough times, both within its alternate-history setting and without. It has survived the fall of the United States to a unified Korea – reinvented by the writers as a nation of *Titanfall* extras equipped with DNA-locked weapons. It has survived the bankruptcy of original publisher THQ. It has weathered the near-collapse of THQ's successor, Crytek, with Koch Media swooping in to pluck the studio now known as Dambuster from the wreckage. But we're not sure it's going to survive the attentions of Dorothy the personal fitness trainer, OXM's custom character during our time with the game's four-player co-op mode.

Dorothy's key traits are as follows. First, she looks a bit like *The Simpsons'*

Hans Moleman. Second, she has more stamina than most characters thanks to her pre-war vocation (the options in co-op include stevedores who bleed out more slowly and exterminators who can make bombs from rat poison). Finally, her best friend is the Inferno Launcher – it spits incendiary shards, showing off *The Revolution's* lighting systems. Some may categorise the Inferno Launcher as a medium-range terrain denial weapon, but to Dorothy it's suited to every scenario. Fistfights, say, or while exploring cellars, or whenever you're feeling bored.

Thing is, the Inferno Launcher kinda is suited to every scenario. *The Revolution's* secret is that while it casts you as a scruffy resistance fighter, making IEDs from scrap in an open-world city overrun by self-driving tanks, it has all the rich customisation of its spiritual forebear the *Crysis* series. More, it makes *Crysis* look thin.

Bluffer's Guide

Open-world shooter with heavy-duty weapon customization set in Philadelphia following North Korea's successful invasion of the US, featuring four-player co-op but no PvP.



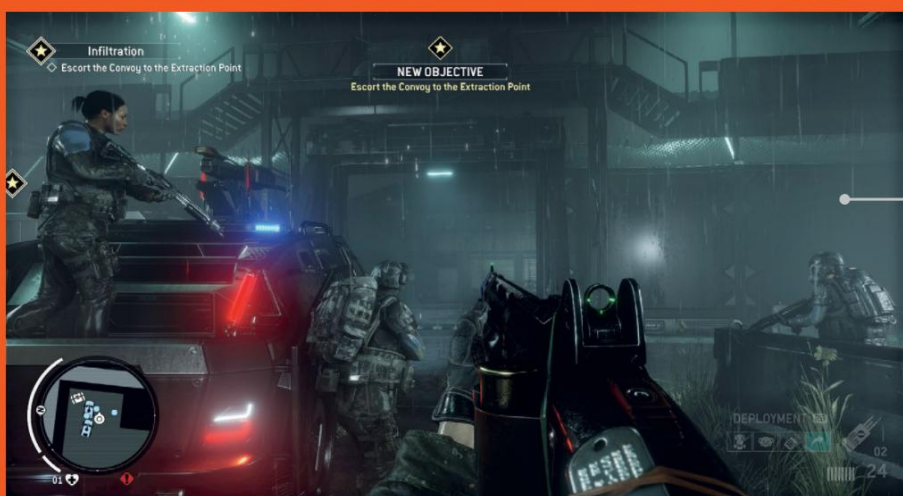
As in *Crysis*, holding Y enables you to tinker with a gun while you're walking around.

// *The Revolution's* secret is that although you're a scruffy fighter it has all the customization of *Crysis* //

Each co-op character's background grants a skill. Some are shared between characters. Dropped ammo and materials must be shared.

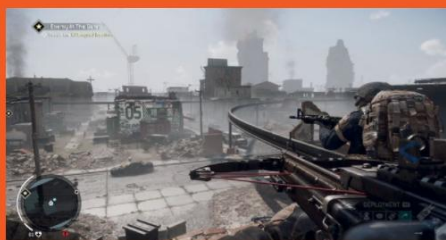


The game's frag, flame and hacker grenades are powerful - and scarce. Use them wisely.



Downed allies can be revived, but letting them respawn at base may be safer.

Keeping the formation loose is important, but players are easy to kill when isolated.



How the Koreans overran America while wearing luminous targets on their chests escapes us.



» Aside from slapping on accessories such as suppressors and scopes during play, you can rip away a gun's top half and replace it with a different set of components from the same category. Thus, an assault rifle can be turned into a sticky mine thrower, a basic sidearm into a gas-powered pistol, and an Inferno Launcher into a shotgun.

You're limited to three guns per category, and it takes an often-crucial few seconds to turn one into another, which does foster a more calculating approach. You can't just carpet a position in fireballs, then transform your launcher into an SMG while actually galloping into the flames. Not that Dorothy ever made that mistake...

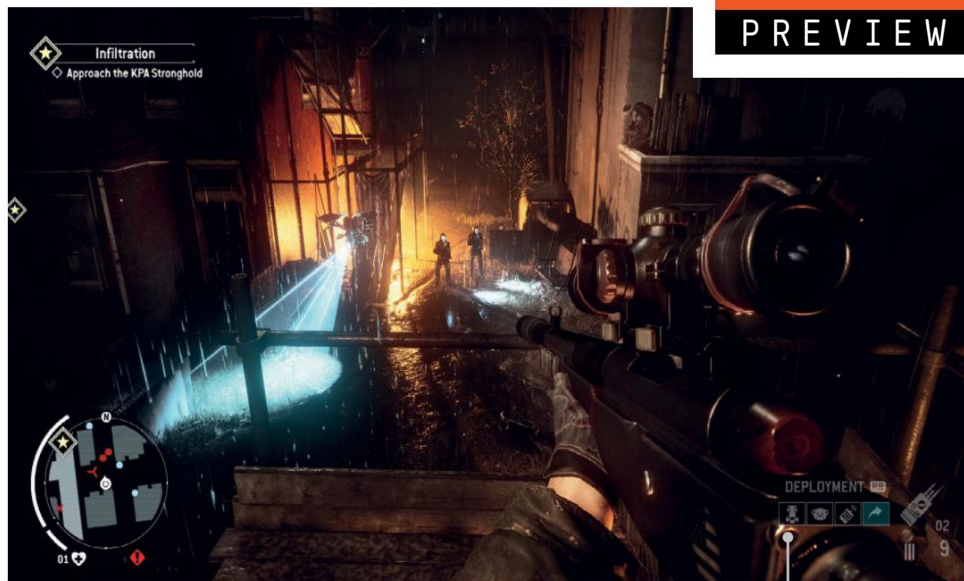
The co-op missions we sample – which exist independently of the campaign but take place in similarly open-ended urban environments – are a bit generic, though livened up by the quirks of the arsenal. In the first we hunt down elite soldiers by hacking radar stations hidden in apartments, then holding off a Korean People's Army counterattack. After we locate our quarry there's a brief, hectic bike race across the city to its patrol route, where we attempt to lie in ambush.

Ducking and dying

The Philadelphia of *Homefront* hasn't quite been bombed flat, and the ability to work your way up to a sniping spot during a clash is one of the game's big, if riskier, thrills. The handling sits between *Dying Light* and *Battlefield 3* – you can haul yourself onto roofs and vault low cover, but basic movement and sprinting are ponderous, and death is swift when taking fire on anything above normal difficulty.

Ammunition is also scarcer than in most shooters – you'll need to loot corpses after most scuffles, particularly if you make a habit of shapeshifting your gear (ammo doesn't transform along with the gun). All told, it's mostly bloody trench warfare with occasional bouts of *Far Cry*-style flanking and athletics. And stupidity. At one point Dorothy wheel-plants a foe just as a friendly clips him with a Molotov cocktail. Take that, Evel Knievel.

The second mission, a series of wave defense battles, isn't quite as memorable, but the third is a gripping jaunt into stealth territory. The objective is to infiltrate a base at night and make off with a couple of tanks, a feat we accomplish by sneaking through a sewage pipe and hitting the KPA in the rear.



From there, we manage to blow up the tanks we should be escorting a few times (see also: carpeting a position in fireballs). At long last, we secure the prize and set off through the ruins, Dorothy riding in the back of one tank. It's a potent blend of white-knuckle chaos and suspense. There are flashes of *Gears of War*, even, to how KPA reinforcements appear out of the night, catching our convoy from all angles like Locust emerging from their sink-holes.

We sense *The Revolution*'s longevity will depend not on how creatively you

play, but on how creatively the KPA fight. Right now the opposition is made up of familiar faces – run-and-gun stormtroopers, snipers who are given away by their laser sights, the

aforesaid heavies, and various drones that can be recruited to your cause temporarily using electronic grenades. Mix all this together and you have the basis for some diverting system-driven

scraps, assisted by fairly mobile, aggressive AI, but there are no surprises worthy of a shooter in which every rifle is a minelayer in disguise.

This speaks to the larger issue with the new *Homefront*. The game has endured many cataclysms since reveal, but its greatest problem remains that it's a decent yet (right now) inessential alternative to *Far Cry*, much as its predecessor was billed as a substitute for *Call of Duty*. Such comparisons have their uses for marketing, but only up to a point. *The Revolution* has the makings of an entertaining and substantial blockbuster, but also one that hits a little too close to home.

Edwin Evans-Thirlwell

A good vantage point helps, but aerial drones will soon smell you out.

ETA
17 May

Metadata

OR TRY...



Metro: Last Light – A literal tunnel shooter set in post-nuclear Russia. Two parts horror, one part survival sim.



Far Cry 4 – The open world FPS to beat on Xbox One – agile, vivid and full of distractions.



Philly's shopping scene

Microtransactions? Don't start a riot...

The Revolution is the latest shooter to offer optional microtransactions, in this case crates for weapons, ordnance, attachments, and so on that you buy using either in-game cash or the real thing. Each contains three, semi-random items. You can also acquire boosters to speed up the acquisition of currency or XP – another tried-and-tested monetization feature. Fairly harmless on the surface, especially in the absence of a PvP mode, but we'll obviously keep an eye on it.



Codemasters' Ego 3.0 engine produces stunning scenery that stretches miles into the background.

PUBLISHER CODEMASTERS / DEVELOPER CODEMASTERS / FORMAT XBOX ONE

Dirt Rally

So long, Ken Block, hello Sweden muck

Our shredded back left wheel is down to spark-spitting bare metal and our smashed-in brakelights are black and hollow, so the wrecked rear of our Ford Focus resembles a leering skull. Worst of all, we can't even rewind. Codemasters introduced the concept of turning back time in racers but here in *Dirt Rally* it's slammed into reverse and ditched entirely. Throw in damage that you can't disable and no racing line to rely on, and you have the series' most punishing entry yet.

"Ever since racing games have had racing lines I've not learned the tracks very well because I'm just following the green and red line," says chief games designer Paul Coleman. "We want the player to listen to the co-driver, who's giving you a lot more instruction as to where to place the car on the road." Essentially, warnings such as "Keep left over crest" and "You're going the wrong way" and "Please stop, I'm a father" are audio alternatives to visual guidance.

Dirt's deepest handling ever sits at the heart of these choices. During our

Bluffer's Guide

Drive very fast up narrow European country roads, and try not to slip up on the variety of terrains or you'll have to restart the entire event.

playthrough we immediately feel the difference between wheels gripping rock and tarmac, skidding on loose gravel and mud, and bouncing across rain-slick cobbles. Complex tyre models, we're told, actually simulate digging through layers to find traction underneath. Even with the assists on – stability control, ABS, etc. – *Dirt Rally* is hard.

This is because Codemasters wants you to fear crashes. "Rally is an endurance sport. It's all about keeping your car together over the course of a long event, and to introduce flashbacks would basically mean that we were eliminating one of the big decisions that we put in," says Coleman. "I think it was the right thing to do because we were going for that edge-of-the-seat driving, that making one mistake could cost you a rally." This proves compelling for championships, in which upgradeable crews repair vehicles between heats, but it seems a little unfair that you can't turn it off in custom events.

Tracks themselves are now dimensionally identical recreations

rather than creatively loose riffs, all narrow canyons where deviating mere inches from the optimal route means clipping a bank and tumbling off a cliff or charging into a crowd of shovel-faced onlookers. The harsher and less obedient physics make navigating these slippery channels even harder. At one point in a night drive across treacherous Swedish ice our headlights graze

a wall and break, forcing us to struggle on blind. Another time we slightly misjudge one of many momentum-killing hairpins and snag on a boulder, so we have to slowly back the car up.

"What you often end up doing," says Coleman, "is making the cars feel like they're still fun to drive down a wide track, so you make them faster. That can actually make them harder to drive, and so you end up in a bit of a vicious circle where you make one thing wider and you have to make another thing faster."

From a purely aesthetic standpoint, settings sacrifice some atmosphere on the quest for realism. Compare *Dirt 3's* blissful Serengeti, yacht-

ETA
5 APR



PREVIEW



There are three Rallycross circuits: Höljes in Sweden, Lydden Hill in England, and Hell in Norway.



//Our headlights graze a wall and break, so we struggle on blind//

Co-driver's calls throwing you off? Make him alert you either earlier or later.

stuffed Monte Carlo bay, snowy ski resort, and ramp-filled coliseum to *Dirt Rally*'s grey Welsh moor or plain Greek countryside. Even Norway's promisingly-named Rallycross track, Hell, is an unambitious patch of concrete. This is no longer about blazing around gorgeous fantasy courses and powering through finish lines to a

flurry of confetti and Dutch angles. It's about being scolded for cutting corners as your co-driver announces there'll be a "steward's enquiry", and trying to limit air time because you're worried about hurting your suspension.

Physics and handling are more detailed than ever, tasking you with considering terrain and driving

with appropriate caution before you do irreparable damage, and while requiring a greater level of focus, this costs the game its fun flair. Outside standard rallies, Rallycross mode is less riotous because you have only three opponents, and hill climbs (rallies on a gradient) are like tightrope walking with moon boots on. The across-the-board removal of racing lines and rewinds makes for an intense challenge that, for better or worse, is more concerned with respecting rules than breaking them.

Ben Griffin

Metadata

PREVIOUSLY IN...



Series high-point *Dirt 3* had beautiful fantasy courses, satisfying handling, and an addictive score-attack mode.



Dirt Showdown left point-to-point behind for obstacle-lead Rallycross, trick events and demolition derbies.



Evo-lution

What makes this version better than last year's PC release?

Dirt Rally has been available on Steam since December. The Xbox One release comes with a few extra features, including a gravel version of Pike's Peak and cars such as the Peugeot 208, Renault Alpine, and Renault 5 Turbo. There's also a set of in-depth tutorials with primers on rally theory, from feathering throttles to Scandinavian flicks. And although inferior anti-aliasing makes edges slightly rougher than on top-end PCs, this version impressively sustains a constant 60fps.

Familiar tracks like Spa, Silverstone, Brands Hatch, Nordschleife, Nurburgring, Imola, and Monza are all present.

The visuals are bold and solid, though not quite as photorealistic as *Project CARS'* environments.



PUBLISHER 505 GAMES / DEVELOPER KUNOS SIMULAZIONI / FORMAT XBOX ONE



Assetto Corsa

The racer that's aiming to beat Forza on simulation quality. Start your engines!

Bluffer's Guide

Assetto Corsa is a racing game built around driving sim technology used by professional racing drivers and car manufacturers. And it's already great on PC.

You probably don't recognise the name. *Assetto Corsa* is a hardcore racing sim (no relation to *Corsa America*, as far as we can tell) that's been pleasing hardcore racing fans on PC since 2013. But what sets it apart from its rivals is its background. Its physics engine is used by Ferrari, Abarth, and Dallara for development. While *Forza* may be an impressive videogame, *Assetto Corsa's* simulation is the track-tested real deal.

And it's certainly not by accident. Kunos Simulazioni's offices are located at the Vallelunga racetrack near Rome, Italy. The team can see cars zooming past the window while they work. And when you have that

kind of daily access to professional teams, cars, and drivers, it gives you an understanding of what the driving experience should be like in a game.

Assetto's list of licenced vehicles may not be a match for *Forza*, but it's certainly no slouch either, sporting the likes of BMW, McLaren, Mercedes, Lotus, and Chevrolet – plus a little-known marque called Ferrari, which has granted the use of the dazzling new FXX-K on the cover. Real-world tracks are also in, though the weather variations extend only to track temperature and cloud cover. No rain or night racing here.

Instead, all the development effort has gone into honing the core experience, and it really shows.

The feeling of weight is exceptional, like you're in an actual car in contact with an actual track. Taking that gorgeous Ferrari FXX-K out around Spa for a hot lap with a wheel and pedals setup feels like taking part in a real-life track day. And while you can still find yourself in a spin, it's because you didn't give a corner like Blanchimont the respect it

deserves. There's no over-egged dragging sensation if you touch the grass, just sudden, frightening instability. It's beautiful.

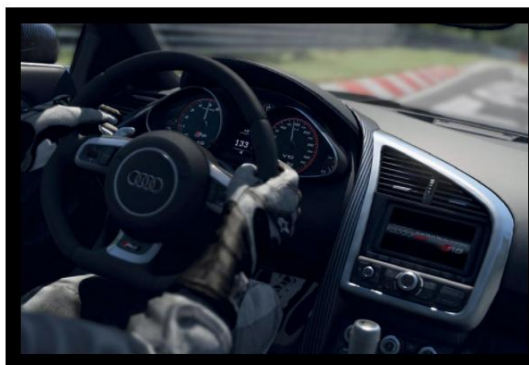
It isn't just a hot lap sim, of course – there are plenty of races too. The AI is devilishly quick, meaning it can take a couple of laps just to get in a position to attempt a pass, which is refreshingly realistic. Collisions also feel excellent, with solid-feeling rival cars and believable instability from nudges. While there will be some damage, both mechanical and aesthetic, the extent of visible destruction will vary according to manufacturers' terms.

All the content that's already in the PC game will be in the Xbox One version, with the exception of a new interface for console and a slightly lower limit on multiplayer grid size (still impressive at 16 cars). With varying disciplines from the last 50 years of motorsport, solid 60fps graphics and what genuinely threatens to be the best handling model ever, this really could cause *Forza* and *Project CARS* some headaches this spring.

Justin Towell

ETA
22 APR

// *Forza* may be impressive but *Assetto Corsa* is the real deal //



Name not Andretti?

You don't need to be a pro to have fun

The main reason for buying *Assetto Corsa* is to enjoy its supreme realism. But it still has lower difficulty levels, handling assists, and the obligatory "dynamic racing line" to follow, telling you what to do. Still, consider this: most people don't skid off the road at every turn in their real automobiles. And since this is such a realistic simulation of real autos, just driving the full sim mode sensibly isn't so monstrous. Cars have brakes for a reason, y'know.



PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO / DEVELOPER SPIKE CHUNSOFT / FORMAT XBOX ONE

One Piece: Burning Blood

The anime fighter should probably see a doctor about that

Bluffer's Guide

A bizarre brawler that gives you many options. It can be an accessible anime treat or complex fighting challenge – it can be whatever you want it to be, honey.

Just in case you're not up-to-date on your anime, we'll give you a quick synopsis of *One Piece*. It's about a seven-year-old called Monkey D. Luffy who wants to become king of the pirates, but causes himself serious problems by eating a mystical fruit that turns his body into rubber. Got it? Good.

Now forget all of that, because none of it really matters when a fighter is this much unadulterated fun. *One Piece: Burning Blood*'s brawling is highly reminiscent of the *Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Storm* series, but manages to distinguish itself through speed, style, and strategy.

Movement around the 3D arenas is nipper and more responsive than

in the *Storm* games, so dealing and dodging blows feels as satisfying as it looks cinematic. That's saying something, as this one's a genuine showpiece: breakable stage elements mean that taking a superpowered punch results in your chosen character blazing an embarrassing trail of obliterated floor and market stalls.

Burning Blood lets you select a team of three *One Piece* stars, whose mid-bout smack-talk is provided by the anime's voice actors. Combos are accessible enough (left bumper plus face buttons for special attacks): the real challenge of the three-on-three melee lies in players switching out their fighters throughout the match, forcing you to strategize on-the-fly.

Since you're able to control only one character at a time, swashbuckling success is largely dependent on tagging in the most situation-appropriate brawler via the left or right trigger. Think of it like an unhinged version of Pokémon. Luffy boasts a "Speed" playstyle, an agile advantage versus the hook-handed, "Balanced" Crocodile (and we

wouldn't rate our chances against an unbalanced one).

Anime-inspired abilities involving Devil Fruit and Haki (willpower) add another layer of strategy.

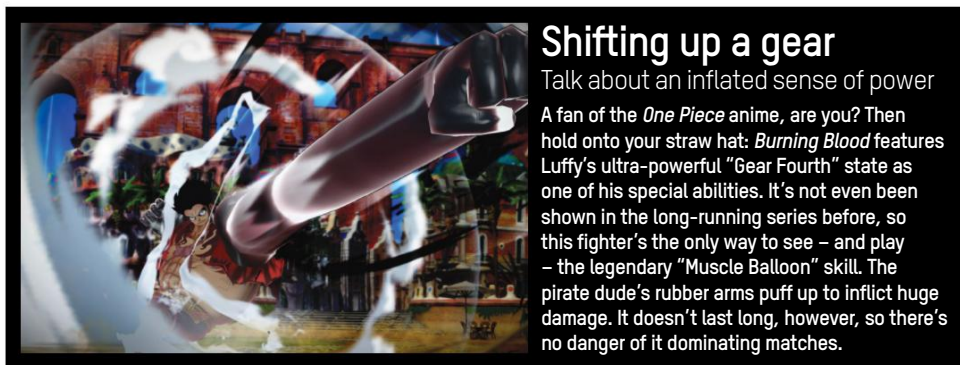
Millinery enthusiast Sabo is partial to the Flame-Flame Fruit, granting fiery attacks, so a character with Haki powers needs to be tagged in to face him, or your chances of victory could go up in smoke.

All sound too high-falutin' for the button-mashers out there? Relax. *One Piece: Burning Blood* is so relentlessly stylish and mechanically solid that it makes itself easy to enjoy. But there are undoubtedly elements that are less enjoyable. The character cutscenes wear thin when we're subjected to barrages of them in an otherwise fast and fluid match, and after repeatedly bouncing off Bartolomeo's almost invincible fruit-powered barrier, we're insisting his playstyle title be changed from "Tricky" to "Cheating". The devs will be tweaking things and adding characters before release, so we hope the game will arrive in, ahem, one piece.

Paul Randall



//So relentlessly stylish that it makes itself easy to enjoy//



Shifting up a gear

Talk about an inflated sense of power

A fan of the *One Piece* anime, are you? Then hold onto your straw hat: *Burning Blood* features Luffy's ultra-powerful "Gear Fourth" state as one of his special abilities. It's not even been shown in the long-running series before, so this fighter's the only way to see – and play – the legendary "Muscle Balloon" skill. The pirate dude's rubber arms puff up to inflict huge damage. It doesn't last long, however, so there's no danger of it dominating matches.

PREVIEW





PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX / DEVELOPER IO-INTERACTIVE / FORMAT XBOX ONE

Hitman

Agent 47's biggest-ever sandboxes are murder on your feet

Most criminals like to hide in the shadows. But then Viktor Novikov, owner of the prestigious French fashion house Sanguine, isn't most criminals. When Agent 47 touches down in Paris for the first mission proper in this, the first *Hitman* for new-gen consoles, it doesn't take him long to find his target. Walking into the opulent lobby of Sanguine's latest decadent catwalk show, he finds an audience gathered at the foot of a grand staircase. On the balcony above, spotlight shining on his every move, is the charismatic Novikov, his mere presence met with rapturous applause from the fashion world's elite.

But what his admiring audience doesn't know is that Novikov leads a secret double life as the kingpin of the IAGO spy network – and on the top floor of the building, unseen by partygoers, unscrupulous types are

bidding on a list of names of British secret agents recently uncovered by IAGO's network. British security outfit MI6 has decided that this won't do, which is where Agent 47 comes in. "He really knows how to make an entrance!" an uppity snob next to you chirps as Novikov laps up the plaudits. Unfortunately for Novikov, he's about to meet someone who knows how to make an exit.

Stopping the show

After the murky "hunter becomes the hunted" vibe of 2012's *Hitman: Absolution*, with its linear levels and gritty exposition, this is a glorious return to what brought Agent 47 to the party in the first place: the opportunity to travel around the world, committing private assassinations in the most public of locations. We've seen *Hitman*'s stunning Parisian opener "The Showstopper" before – behind closed doors at E3, the developers treated us to a camera flyover of the mansion grounds to give some sense

of its scale, and last August a video walkthrough showcased some of the possible routes you can take to your target. But this marked the first time we were let loose with a controller to plot our own routes to the finish line, and it's only by playing that you truly appreciate how vast and rich with murderous potential it is. An initially restrictive corridor of public party areas soon, once you "procure" the right outfit, gives way to a winding network of backstage areas: frantic make-up rooms where divas and artists flit about, plush gardens where some of the more esteemed guests arrive by chopper, clattering kitchens full of overworked chefs and waiters, a heavily-guarded attic of treasure troves. And most tantalizing of all, an underground staff room where mechanics and magicians mingle, and where patient assassins can lie in wait for any disguise they want.

Io-Interactive's claim that *The Showstopper* is the biggest *Hitman* level to date (teasingly, it's hinted

Bluffer's Guide

The return of one of gaming's more unusual series. As the titular hitman, sneak into enemy compounds, using disguises to gain access to guarded areas, and bump off your target, either using your own hands or by causing an "accident".



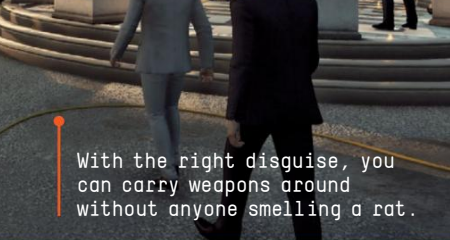


Agent 47's timeless fashion allows him to blend in with the French bourgeois effortlessly, but he'll stick out like a sore thumb backstage. Unless...



It's easy to get within spitting distance of Novikov, but near-impossible to get alone with him, thanks to his ever-present guard.

Once you sneak backstage, endless opportunities for capers present themselves: there are loudspeakers to rig, fire alarms to set off...



With the right disguise, you can carry weapons around without anyone smelling a rat.

//You might think the crowds would get in the way, but eavesdropping raises new possibilities//

» that forthcoming DLC levels will be even bigger) rings true, but bigger isn't always better, of course. We're reminded of *Hitman: Blood Money's* gargantuan Murder of Crows level, set during a Mardi Gras parade, which with its unresponsive crowds and lack of opportunities to think outside of the box ended up being one of that game's weaker levels. But our hands-on time suggests that the new *Hitman's* crowds have the AI chops to finally fulfill Io-Interactive's ambitions.

You might think the crowds would only get in the way of a perfect hit, but eavesdropping on conversations raises new angles and possibilities. Outside of the grounds, a news team report live, and listening to their spiel reveals that a bitter journalist is plotting something devious inside. Is there a way to leverage that to your advantage? Elsewhere, the make-up tables are predictably a good place for gossip; tune in on a couple of stylists swooning over a famous model, and if you stick around long enough they'll notice you skulking and comment on your physical similarity to him, so perhaps "borrowing" the model's identity could open some closed doors? The level is littered with little incidental interactions like this, which are marked on the map as "opportunities". They are exactly that, nudging you towards new ways to toy with the map and new ways to reach your targets.

Hitman is built for replayability, right down to the delivery model. After much to-ing and fro-ing, Square Enix is pushing ahead with its plan to make *Hitman* an episodic release. The base pack will consist only of a tutorial and the Showstopper level, with additional levels released on a monthly basis for a hefty \$10 each. Now we've experienced the scope of one of the

levels, forcing players to wait a month for their next hit actually appears shrewd: it encourages them to mine conquered levels for undiscovered secrets. The built-in Contracts system ensures there's plenty of reasons to extend your stay in Paris. In addition to an Achievement-esque checklist to fill in, there are bespoke missions that remix the level entirely: Escalation Contracts challenge you to bump off a target five times in succession, with the conditions needed to fulfill the contract growing ever more unusual and demanding. Most intriguing of all, however, are the Elusive Hits – targets that are dropped into the

stage periodically, which you have one chance, and one chance only, to kill. If they escape, they escape. How you off them, and how successful you were at staying undetected, will be stamped onto your permanent records for all to see. While we didn't get a chance to see these in action, they sound like an irresistible, ever-shifting challenge

for those of us who rinsed previous *Hitmans* for the elusive Silent Assassin rankings.

If this is *Hitman's* opening salvo, then like Novikov it definitely knows how to make an entrance.

Combining the freeform design of *Hitman 2* with the environmental mischief of *Hitman: Blood Money* and the satisfying headshots and streamlined mechanics of *Absolution*, The Showstopper is already in contention for best *Hitman* level ever. With five more levels to come down the pipeline – taking us on murder sprees that span the globe from Marrakesh to Bangkok – the pressure is on for Io to maintain this level of quality to keep the fanbase engaged. Let's hope they know how to make an exit.

Alex Dale

Talk about hiding in plain sight: Agent 47's disguises can take him all the way to the catwalk.

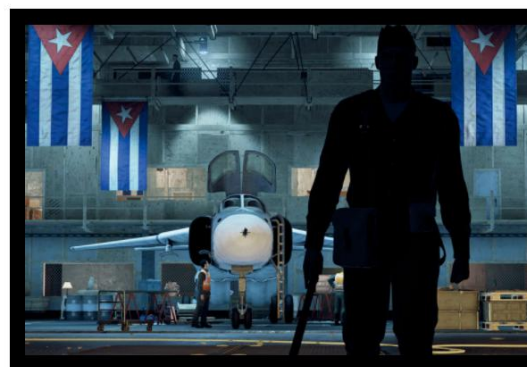
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BIG IDEA...



Absolution's suspicion cones return, refined. Bag the uniform of, say, a police officer, and you'll be known only to his close colleagues. Anyone likely to become suspicious of you has a handy white dot above them.



Acting up

Getting your Learner's Permit to Kill

Hitman's superb tutorial mode whisks us back 20 years to 47's arrival at the Agency, where he assays warehouse mockups of hits completed by agents of yore. The first, set on a yacht, has you bump off a playboy gangster, by pistol, poison or pulverization. The second requires you to halt the getaway of a chess ace turned spy. His contacts have arranged for him to escape by fighter jet; tampering with the ejector seat is but one way to ensure the unlucky actor earns his danger pay.

FEATURE

DIVIDE

The first thing that strikes us during our extended hands-on session with Tom Clancy's *The Division* isn't an enemy sniper's bullet or brutal melee attack (those come later), but the game's absolutely stunning visual presentation. A real apocalypse wow.

Unfolding in New York City after a population-wiping plague has been unleashed via contaminated banknotes, the open-world online action-RPG drops its heroes in a scarily real post-pandemic Big Apple. According to associate creative director Julian Gerighty, getting the setting right was key to staying true to the Clancy universe. "One of the values we have as a Tom Clancy game is that it has to be grounded in reality, so we really wanted to create something that was a living, breathing mid-crisis NYC... a city that is reeling from this catastrophic event. We've built what we think is the closest thing to a one-to-one representation of New York that has ever been seen in a videogame."

IT'S THE SEASON... TO DIE

Of course, because the story's city-crippling attack takes place on Black Friday – the busiest shopping day of the year – *The Division*'s dystopian setting is creepily contrasted with the heartwarming detritus of the holiday season. Our demo, for example, begins on a decked out West 24th Street; Christmas tree lots line the pavements, festive strings of lights

snake around trees and lamp posts, and a large neon "Happy Holidays" banner looms overhead. Most unsettling, though, is a fat-faced decorative Santa that perpetually smiles despite a corpse being looted just a few feet from where he stands.

It's this disturbing juxtaposition that snaps us out of our sightseeing tour and straight into city-saving action. As we approach the two thugs pillaging Santa's rotting friend, we don't receive a holiday greeting, but a pair of handguns aimed at our face. We react accordingly, taking cover behind an abandoned taxi cab, arming our assault rifle, and scoring headshots on the low-level threats. On top of giving us a feel for the game's crunchy third-person combat, the swift encounter offers a taste of its satisfyingly sticky cover system and RPG-style leveling; the former quickly removes us from harm's way with an intuitive "A" button press, while the latter introduces itself via a gratifying "+40XP" that pops out of our victims' bleeding skulls. It's very *Borderlands*.

Described as "rioters or looters" by Gerighty, the hoodie-wearing thugs are among the game's weakest enemies. As proven by the reckless street punk charging us with a baseball bat, though, this group is as unpredictable as they are dangerous. As we approach a yellow taxi cab that apparently crashed onto the sidewalk in the midst of the crisis, two more corpse-ravaging criminals attack. Again, the encounter concludes with a bullet to each baddie's brainpan and 80 tasty experience points for our efforts.

Eliminating these early threats with ease isn't totally unexpected, as *The Division* places you in the boots of highly-trained, self-supported sleeper agents. Working for the "Strategic Homeland Division", these operatives are activated after conventional methods of law enforcement and military have failed to bring the city back from the brink. Players are able to personalize their agents at the start

Words: Matt Cabral

We take a gluttonous bite of The Division's rotting Big Apple and leave beaten, bloodied, and hungry for more

WE FALL

"RIOTERS ARE AS UNPREDICTABLE AS THEY ARE DANGEROUS"

A distressing sight, we're shooting tonight, slaughter in a winter wonderland.

of the game, choosing their sex and customizing cosmetic features from a modest selection of options. Our stylish agent sports a gray faux hawk, aviator-style sunglasses, and a prominent facial scar suggesting she probably saw some action before waking up on the wrong side of Armageddon.

YOU'VE GOT MAIL

We enjoy teaching low-life looters some manners while we get comfortable with the game's basic controls and mechanics, but our agent has much bigger fish to fry if she's to pull NYC from the edge of extinction. As we soon discover, the first step in waking up the city that never sleeps is establishing a base of operations at the historic post office sitting across from Pennsylvania Station and Madison Square Garden.

As we begin our trek to 33rd Street, a light snow adds to the blanket of

white already covering the large piles of garbage, abandoned vehicles and corpses littering our path. Save for the occasional rat scurrying by or stray dog approaching us, things are eerily quiet... until gun shots ring out and a desperate cry for help fills the airwaves. It seems the post office is close by, but it needs to be secured before we're able to enter, set up shop, and hopefully grab a hot cocoa.

Armed thugs have taken a stand outside the federal building, but unlike the previous crew we encountered, these stragglers are corralled by a big bad named Poole. Save for the chunky shield meter hovering above his standard health bar – suggesting he won't go down as easily as his henchmen – the leader looks just like his underlings. Complicating matters is the fact the inclement weather has picked up significantly, creating near-

whiteout conditions. On the plus side, two other live players have joined our party to help thwart this new threat.

LOOTING AND REBOOTING

While our co-op partners keep Poole busy, we seamlessly navigate cover points to sneak up on his rabble. Combined with this tactic, our agent's ability to vault provides her with an unexpected nimbleness that puts her in melee-striking distance of the targets. Feeding foes the butt of our shotgun is, unsurprisingly, spectacularly satisfying. The jaw-shattering act also reveals *The Division* to be equal parts shooter and RPG. Enemies don't crumple to the ground when we cave in their skulls, but drop when the game's behind-the-scenes stats say that they've endured enough. Similarly, bigger bads like Poole don't go down with a precision headshot – or even two or three –





SURVIVAL OF THE LONELIEST

GOING YOUR OWN WAY...
AND TAKING ALL
THE CREDIT/LOOT

Much like *Destiny*, *The Division* is best enjoyed with a group of friends. Unlike Bungie's social sci-fi fragger, though, Ubi's open-world online RPG contains no content that cannot be completed by players who'd rather go it alone.

The game's difficulty during story missions, side quests, and other skirmishes scales to 1-4 players, so solo agents are never required to group-up.

Even the multiplayer-fueled Dark Zone can be infiltrated and enjoyed by a solo agent. In fact, it's one of associate creative director Julian Gerighty's favorite ways to play. "I like to play the Dark Zone by myself. I can sneak in and out, use the fact that I'm by myself and not attracting attention to grab the stuff I need, quickly extract, and no one is the wiser. The experience is that much more tense. I don't need to go in with other Division agents."

THE DIVISION

but instead absorb bullets much like *Destiny*'s spongy aliens.

Of course, lead-eating enemies aren't the only thing *The Division* has in common with Bungie's shared world shooter. Loot is the name of the game, and there are plenty of shiny goodies to go around following this heated conflict. Upon stuffing our backpack with health, ammo, body armor gloves, and enough weapon mods to make a gun-nut blush, we turn our attention back to the post office. Ironically, its famed inscription "Neither snow nor rain nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds" is nowhere to be seen. What with the plague eating most of NYC's population you can't blame posties for binning all those birthday cards and bills.

When we enter the historic landmark, creative director Magnus Jansen describes its importance in shaping your character. "A lot of progress is tied to the base of operations. It's almost the second character in the game. When you start the base, you go out and do missions and all kinds of activities to get the ability and the personnel to be able to invest in it. In turn, you get more powerful because you then unlock new skills, abilities, perks and even new sections of the base where you can shop. So the base of operations is really a central part in progressing your character."

The Division does a fantastic job weaving this progression through the narrative by tying these various character-molding traits to the base's



The artists really tidied the subway up. The real thing isn't this neat.



"When did the Post Office get so bad? I only came here for a book of stamps."

FEATURE

ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK

ARE YOU AFRAID OF THE DARK?

As described by creative director Magnus Jansen, *The Division's* multiplayer-driven PvP space the "Dark Zone" could be a cross between the Bermuda Triangle and the Twilight Zone. "In the center of our map, in the center of our narrative, is the Dark Zone. Rules don't apply here, and engagement rules for the Division agents are disabled."

More than secrets, though, this mysterious part of Manhattan is filled with loot-hoarding bad guys. Agents can enter it seamlessly and are matched against players of comparable skill. They can then team-up with these other players to take on brutal AI adversaries and other online participants.

Or they can shoot their pals in the face and steal their high-level loot. It's not, however, as simple as filling your friend full of holes and taking his coolest toys. Turning on another agent marks you as "rogue", essentially putting a big bounty on your head. Unless you want to end up a permanent DZ resident, you need to extract your goods via helicopter. Easier said than done, this task requires you to call in the extraction before defending the landing zone for the entire time it takes the transport to arrive, pick up the loot, and leave.

We're guessing most players won't be able to resist the allure of stabbing a buddy in the back, especially if said buddy is flaunting a new sniper rifle capable of blowing Volkswagen-sized holes through enemies. Of course, continuously being left in a heap on the landing zone should also be enough to set any traitors straight.

medical, tech and security wings. Building out each section, by completing missions and investing resources in them, opens new enhancements and goodies specific to each wing.

Exploring the base immediately reveals a trio of story missions, which Gerighty describes as being key to opening the rest of the game to the player. "These three missions are critically important because they have the staff that you need to bring basic services back online. The three characters and these three threats are critical not only for the story, but also for gameplay. Once you've rescued them, the whole city map, and all of the missions, will be open to you and you'll be able to choose the way you want to play."

While these initial tech, security and medical missions can be completed in any order, we begin with the latter because we assume it's going to take more than bandages and Bactine to keep us breathing in plague city. Before venturing to Madison Square Garden, where a doctor's being held hostage, we gear up. From our inventory, we choose primary and secondary weapons, a sidearm, and various armor pieces, from vests and knee pads to gloves and holsters. Ubisoft is also kind enough to grant us an empty skill slot, which we enthusiastically fill with the sticky grenade ability.

PEW PEW PEW YORK

We're anxious to unleash our new toys on the scumbags that have taken over the famous venue, but we're again stopped in our tracks by *The Division's* breathtaking ability to effectively portray The Capital of the World mid-crisis. Madison Square Garden has been recreated down to the last detail, but now serves as a field hospital rather than a premier destination for concerts and gangly ball-throwing behemoths.

Accompanied by our two teammates, we cautiously enter the building's lobby and draw our weapons. Good thing, too, as we're immediately greeted by six gunmen pouring down the inoperable escalators and opening fire on us. Upon slamming into cover behind a makeshift first aid station, we begin blind firing to keep the baddies at bay. The distraction allows our fellow agents to flank the attackers and fill the improvised hospital's morgue with a half dozen fresh corpses.

We're not so lucky on the second floor, however, where we find ourselves like sitting ducks in the center of the Garden's basketball court. Foes drop

BUILDING A BETTER AGENT

The Division doesn't feature traditional class-based characters, but rather allows you to continuously shape, mold, and build your own personal city-saving badass.

SKILLS

Unlocked as you upgrade your base of operations, these are table-turning active abilities tied to the medical, tech, and security wings. During our demo, we selected the first aid skill from the medical wing, which allowed us to heal both ourselves and allies. As players level up, they'll eventually be able to equip two standard skills and one signature skill at the same time. They can also swap different skills in and out of these slots anytime. Handy!

"EVEN MID-CRISIS THE DETAIL IS BREATHTAKING"

from the surrounding bleachers in droves, and it's just seconds before the screen blurs red and another agent has to race over to retrieve us from death's door. Once revived, we arm our new sticky grenade and launch it at a cluster of adversaries. With a number of targets unknowingly standing within the indicated area of effect, we detonate the explosive remotely and watch chunks of health immediately disappear from their life meters. While we wait for the skill to recharge, our allies keep the threats suppressed long enough for us to rinse and repeat the strategy until the arena's clear.

After equipping a looted utility vest capable of absorbing more damage

TALENTS

Also unlocked as you build your base, talents are passive attributes that generally complement a specific discipline. We unlocked adrenaline and triage talents, both of which helped us keep our team alive. The former had an over-heal effect when using a medkit, while the latter reduced the cooldown time on our first aid skill. Players receive one talent slot from the get-go, but will unlock a further three as the base evolves.

PERKS

Unlocked alongside skills and talents, perks are also passive, but are auto-equipped once earned. Players can have over 30 of these buffs working their magic in the background simultaneously. We earned medkits and hazardous materials perks during our demo, allowing us to carry an extra health pack and increase our Dark Zone inventory respectively.



The Cleaners want to violently eradicate every last bacterium. If they saw the state of *OXM*'s office they'd napalm the lot.



If you're looking for Black Friday bargains here, you're gonna be disappointed.



The Broadway revival of *Cats* was not quite what audiences had expected.

RIOTERS, RIKERS AND CLEANERS, OH MY!

THE MAGGOTS IN THE BIG APPLE

Worrying about your buddies back-stabbing you in the Dark Zone may be the least of your problems, as *The Division* features a trio of distinct, primary enemy factions. Taking advantage of the city's desperate state, the three – which contain a variety of archetypes within their ranks – are out to steal, slay, and ascend to power. Associate creative director Julian Gerighty describes what we're up against.

RIOTERS AND LOOTERS

"The rioters and looters aren't an organised faction. These are stragglers who are preying on the weak and really taking advantage of the situation to survive and to really beat down everybody else."

RIKERS

The Rikers Island prison off Manhattan was overrun, and the prisoners have taken the equipment from the security forces and are on the streets. They're really treating it like their playground. They're unbelievably brutal and you have to stop them."

CLEANERS

These are blue collar workers who decided to take the situation into their own hands. They want to eradicate the virus and will burn everything inside to make sure they can continue to survive. They don't make any distinction between healthy civilians, healthy soldiers or the infected. They have to be stopped too."

bombs that make Molotov cocktails look like scented candles. Down but not out, our agent frantically attempts to snuff out the flames engulfing her even as the Cleaners continue roasting her like a marshmallow.

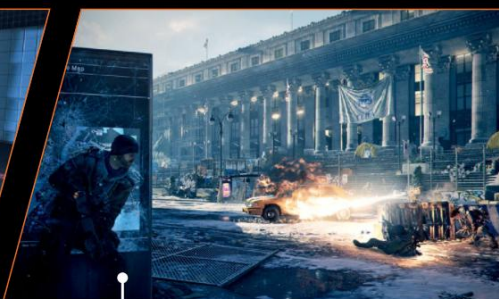
BACK TO BASE

While these firebugs seem like a lovely bunch, we forgo their, er, warm welcome in favor of hightailing it in the other direction. We finally manage to lose them and find our way back to the base, where we immediately head to the medical wing. With our recently acquired supplies, we open a clinic and a decontamination unit, both of which unlock character-building abilities.

We're also granted a meeting, via cutscene, with the doctor we just rescued. Upon thanking us for saving her bacon, the virologist lets loose a few choice expletives when discussing the former colleague who may be responsible for the outbreak. The meaty scene feels like something ripped from a dedicated story-driven game, rather than a lazy attempt to lend some narrative weight to a multiplayer-focused affair.

Additional story elements come courtesy of the base of operations' transformation, as it directly reflects players' personal choices and progress.

Complete missions to bring the Christmas spirit back to your base of operations.



and tweaking our hand-cannon with a new scope, under-barrel, magazine and muzzle, we utilize similar tactics during the mission's final two protracted battles. The first, which unfolds in a VIP lounge high above the arena, puts us face to face with the good doctor and her captors. While the former flees to safety, we keep the latter busy with bullets, flash-bangs and more sticky grenades. With another room full of bleeding meat-bags in our wake, we head to the landmark's roof for one final showdown with the squatters.

On top of waves of enemies and a steady snowfall, the battle brings a seemingly bulletproof boss named Hutch. With resources nearly depleted and trigger fingers sore, we're able to silence the last threat, secure the roof, and collect our mission-capping rewards. We're also bumped to Level 5, prompting us to confidently rappel down the building's elevator shaft and head back to base to admire our goodies.

Our celebration is cut short, however, when a wrong turn puts us back in the line of fire, literally, as a long column of flame stretches from the ground in front of us back to a fire-squirting group of goons. Dubbed "Cleaners" by Gerighty, the pyromaniacs set us ablaze with their flamethrowers and begin tossing



The attention to detail in locations like Grand Central Station is stunning.



Some might say his spider phobia had gotten slightly out of hand.

"A COLUMN OF FLAME STRETCHES BACK TO FIRE-SQUIRTING GOONS"

As Jansen explains, it's a sort of physical representation of the player taking back the city. "When you invest in the base, you get upgrades, but there's also this emotional aspect to it. When you complete missions, the lights come on, it's cleaned up, you get musicians, and life comes back... you get a Christmas feel going." After completing a single mission, our base isn't exactly prepared to host a Dickens-themed holiday party. That said, minor positive changes, like patients arriving for treatment, has us anticipating its continued transformation as we progress through the story and gradually breathe life back into the Big Apple.

Our demo barely puts a dent in *The Division's* sprawling, plague-ridden NYC. We don't get the chance to dig into its PvP-focused Dark Zone, test out its crafting system, or unleash one of those fire-spitting turrets. Based on our brief time spent as an agent, however, we're already counting the days until we're able to douse the Cleaners' flames, delve deeper into the RPG elements, and discover who's really responsible for passing around those deadly dollars.

Well, all that, and we can't wait to play with all the adorable pups we're hoping will show up when we open the security wing's canine unit. ■

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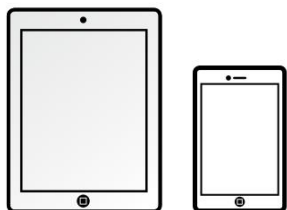


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REVIEWS

The most important Xbox releases rated



OXENFREE

All we hear is radio ga-gaaaaaaarrrrrgh
(it's a horror game about a magic radio) **(p62)**

THIS MONTH IN FACTS

GONE HOME VS RESIDENT EVIL ZERO

	GH	RE0
Creepy mansions	1	1
Shambling undead	0	546
Evidence of failed marriage	Loads!	None

HOW WE SPENT OUR TIME IN THE BANNER SAGA

15%
FIGHTING OFF BRUTAL COLD

15%
WATCHING FOOD DWINDLE

70%
WONDERING IF GRANDMA AND
GRANDPA ARE EDIBLE

HOW LONG TEAM OXM SURVIVED IN THIS WAR OF MINE

Alex: 10 days - got a splinter on
day four and died from infection

Matthew: 1 day - ate all food in
first five minutes, was banished

Emma: Was already dead to us

Tom: 70 days! (Was found sitting
on pile of tiny child bones)

THIS MONTH WE...



Went home **p65**



Robbed a senior citizen **p66**



Had a terrible holiday **p70**



Got pretty muddy **p73**



Drank too much soda **p74**

Pick "You're an idiot." Every time.



PUBLISHER NIGHT SCHOOL STUDIO / DEVELOPER NIGHT SCHOOL STUDIO / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW



REVIEWER
TOM STONE

Live OXM Tom Stone
@TheTomStrange

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?

Adventure game wherein five teens explore a mysterious island.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Saying the wrong thing and then hating yourself for three days. Life.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Adventure game fans who don't mind something short but sweet.

OXENFREE

For once, you'll actually want to listen to what teenagers say

Five teenagers have found the perfect place for their beach party: Edwards Island, which at night is completely deserted and near-impossible to leave. As ideas go, that's up there with inviting Freddy Krueger to your sleepover, and it's not long before dark forces crash the party. This adventure game is at its best when it ignores its horror-trope premise, however, opting instead to tell a charming story of how young people interact with each other.

You play Alex, more of an introvert than a party girl (well, depending on how you play her). She's joined by her new step-brother Jonas, the outsider of the group; Ren, Alex's best friend and the motormouth comic relief; and Nona, a quiet girl who seems to have

been invited by Ren just so he can get close to her. Finally there's Clarissa, the sharp-tongued popular queen bee.

You're rarely prompted to speak. Up to three dialogue options float above you during conversations, and you can select one or let them slowly fade out, opting to say nothing at all. These teens will constantly ramble on, forcing you to interrupt if you want to get a word in. It's more realistic (we all have that one friend who won't shut up), forcing you to make Alex more assertive or leave her a borderline silent protagonist. Just like real life, it's up to you how involved you get, but no matter how much or how little you say, the conversation flows naturally.

The script is rich, with great lines, perfectly delivered by its voice cast.

Playing Alex as either a pleasant people-pleaser or bitchy bridge-burner results in lots of alternative dialogue and character beats, more than justifying a second playthrough.

Say something that resonates with a character, and your face will appear in a thought bubble above them. Whether that's good or bad is left unexplained, leaving you to wonder if you've charmed their socks off, or they're now fantasizing about your murder. It's a rare game in which we wish there was more talking.

When you do shut up, most of *Oxenfree's* gameplay revolves around Alex's portable radio. After inadvertently triggering unknown forces, Alex has to use the radio to traverse the island, activating parts of the world and bypassing gates and doors. Disappointingly, this just involves scrolling through numbers on a dial until you feel the controller vibrate, a dull, guess-what-number-I'm-thinking-of exercise.

Each area has different signals you can tune to, with mysterious messages in Morse code and creepy music that lets you set the ambience. It makes the radio a fun gadget, and is a clever way



Perfectly cast

There's an Achievement for getting all the other characters to hate you. What's impressive is how hard it is to unlock – *Oxenfree's* cast are so fun to spend time with, you won't want any of them in your bad books. Frankly, we could've given them all our Coolest Character award. Apart from Clarissa. Screw Clarissa.



Wisely, the game almost always keeps you paired up with chatty characters.



"It's a rare game in which we wish there was more talking"

to give Edwards Island more character. Shame they didn't find smarter uses for it as a puzzle solving tool.

We're glad that adventure games no longer traffic in the illogical puzzles that once plagued the genre (nightmares about using maple syrup and stolen cat hair to make a false mustache still cause us to wake up screaming), but *Oxenfree* goes too far the other way, refusing to challenge you at all. Bar a couple of easy riddles, there's nothing more advanced than "find the nearby object." Telltale has sometimes been guilty of oversimplifying the puzzles in its adventure games, but if you can successfully load up *Oxenfree*, you're already overqualified to complete it.

It's when the mysterious threat starts revealing itself that the narrative

becomes less intriguing. Early moments when the isle itself appears to change around you are genuinely unsettling, but the trick repeats too often and soon suffers from diminishing returns.

When it focuses on the core cast it's far more interesting. The history between Alex and Clarissa is a particular highlight, with that inspired dialogue system giving a late game argument real dramatic weight.

It feels like the first two acts of a great story. Just when we're getting to know these characters, it steamrolls towards a conclusion that feels rushed. Because even with character relationships giving it replay value, this is still very short. It's also not above some cheap narrative fake-outs, which make it harder to get

Alex has been accused of leaving game discs out of their cases. Punishable by death at OXM HQ.

invested in everyone's fate. One dark moment involving Clarissa could have echoed one of *Life is Strange*'s best scenes, but here feels like it's just deployed for shock value.

Ah, *Life is Strange*. The hella kool elephant in the room. There was little chance we'd get through this review without bringing up the other character-driven, teen-focused, photo-snapping adventure game. *Oxenfree* gets a lot right that *Life is Strange* got wrong (you'd never catch *Oxenfree*'s teens dirtying their mouths with dire-log like "go f--- your selfie"). The difference is, Dontnod made a game that had a smart gameplay mechanic neatly woven into its compelling storyline.

Fun characters and its organic dialogue system make *Oxenfree* an easy recommendation for fans of interactive storytelling. It's the lack of challenge – itself leading in turn to a lack of threat – and underutilized radio idea that make it harder to recommend as an adventure game. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

THE BEST BIT



Real-life arguing sucks. Virtual arguments are *Oxenfree* at its dialogue-rich best.

THE WORST BIT



Opening a door with a radio. Somehow even duller than it sounds.

COMPLETION CLOCK



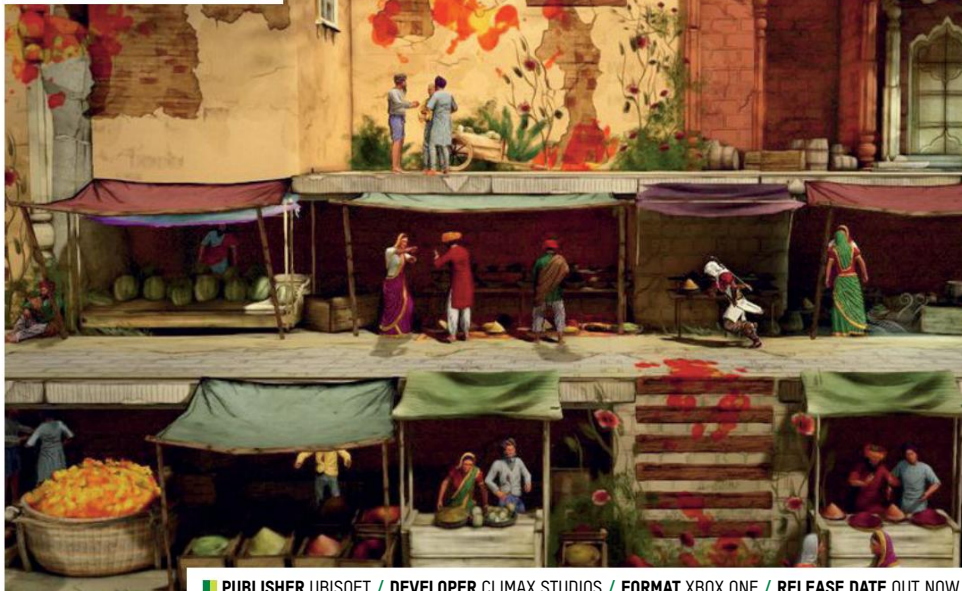
OVERALL

The characters and script make it easy to like, with its inspired approach to in-game dialogue feeling like a step forward. It's a lack of compelling challenge that leaves it a few steps behind.



Mir's mostly silent, but he'll pipe up to let you know exactly which tool you need to solve environmental puzzles.

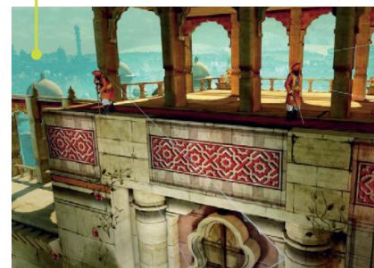
REVIEW



PUBLISHER UBISOFT / DEVELOPER CLIMAX STUDIOS / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW



If there's a ladder nearby, any pursuers are quickly lost - they can't climb.



REVIEWER

CHRIS SCHILLING

Live Rockin Stroll
@schillingc

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?

Spin-off with 19th-century Assassin Arbaaz Mir chasing the Koh-i-Noor diamond.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Fussy controls and inflexible design make *India* a step in the wrong direction.

WHO'S IT FOR?

It may just have enough for *Creed* fanatics and Delhi addicts.

ASSASSIN'S CREED CHRONICLES: INDIA

Exotic locales don't always offer much worth visiting

Like its China-set predecessor, *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: India* wants to have it both ways. This second spin-off again attempts to pair the old-school pattern-learning and trial-and-error challenge of old-fashioned platformers with the slick animation, analog controls and more complex AI of the series that birthed it. But it's an unhappy union: protagonist Arbaaz Mir isn't quite snappy enough to make the platforming fun, while the rigidity of the design and patrol routes rarely allows much deviation from a lone path of least resistance. And shifting rules and odd inconsistencies are ultimately hazardous to your stealth.

What's more, it's far more reliant on instafail sections to pad out what

might otherwise have been a fairly slim runtime. The ability to see every enemy's cone of vision should make its rules much easier to immediately parse - unlike the mainline games, where you can be left wondering how you raised the alarm. But Mir can brush against the very tip of a guard's visual threshold and the screen will instantly turn grey, sending you back to the last checkpoint. Sometimes this isn't too far, but occasionally it can come after ten minutes of immaculate creeping.

It gets worse when you find yourself in a bit of a confrontation - at least in the early stages. Mir has some slick moves, including the ability to roll over assailants, but any alert not only causes nearby troops to investigate, but reinforcements to storm in. You

might be running someone through with your blade, but by the time the animation has completed, you've been shot twice and it's back to you go.

Things improve when you've progressed enough to survive a couple of attacks and unlocked a few more abilities. And if timed tailing missions are nobody's idea of a good time, the objectives are plenty varied. There are glimpses of a heart-flutteringly vibrant outside world, saturated with rich colors reminiscent of the Holi festival. But once you've seen one opulent multi-story building patrolled by the same handful of guard types, you've seen them all. With a gossamer-thin narrative and dreary lead character, what could have been an exotic trip ends up rather pedestrian. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

WORSE THAN...



ASSASSIN'S CREED CHRONICLES: CHINA
We certainly don't remember so many instafail sections last time out, while Shao Jun is a vastly more charismatic protagonist than Mir.

DID YOU KNOW?



The Koh-i-Noor was once the largest known diamond in the world, weighing a whopping 793 carats.

COMPLETION CLOCK



WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?



Next up, rifle-toting Assassin Nikolai Orellov infiltrates a Bolshevik-held house to pilfer a Piece of Eden.

OVERALL

Offering neither the thrilling gymnastic momentum of *Prince of Persia* nor the flexible sneaking of its superstar sibling, *ACC: India* finds itself spinning off into a dead-end street.





PUBLISHER MAJESCO ENTERTAINMENT / DEVELOPER THE FULLBRIGHT COMPANY/MIDNIGHT HOUSE / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW



REVIEWER

ALEX DALE

Live ChocoboOfDoom
@SporadicDaler

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?

Horror-tinged adventure in which you scour a creepy mansion for traces of your family.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Tense, slow, anxious, worrying, and poignant – often all at the same time.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Would-be sleuths, or anyone who likes the idea of poking around someone else's house.

GONE HOME

Is staying in the new bleeding out?

This unassuming-looking adventure game was a cult hit upon its release on PC in 2013, with many pundits heralding it as a revolution in videogame storytelling. That probably now seems a bit excessive for a game in which you mostly wander around an abandoned house snooping around cupboards. But if you leave preconceptions at the front door and throw yourself into *Gone Home*'s world, you'll be rewarded with a subversive take on the horror genre that'll stay with you far longer than its two-hour runthrough time.

You star as Kaitlin Greenbriar, a 21-year-old student who returns home after a year traveling to find her house deserted, with an ominous note pinned to the door from her sister, urging her

not to go looking for clues to her whereabouts. So naturally, you do exactly that, creaking round the lonely corridors of the abandoned property, reading the notes that have been left behind and pulling on any story threads you encounter to see where they lead.

There's plenty to take in: a failed career as an author seems to be taking her father to the brink; elsewhere, you uncover evidence of an extra-marital affair. Rumours about your late uncle's mental state run rife, as do the stories of what happened in this home before it was bequeathed to your parents in his will. And with such a murky history lurking behind the property, who's stupid enough to be fooling about with a seance kit, anyway? But the most worrying revelations concern your

sister, Samantha, who's troubled both by a stalker and unexpected developments in her love life. There's a tremendous sense of foreboding throughout the adventure, and it climaxes with a brilliant twist.

Games like *Gone Home* are witheringly referred to as "walking simulators" because you don't actually do much other than stroll around taking in the atmosphere, but that somewhat misses the point: such games bridge the gap between film and game, letting you explore a horror set at your own pace, and allow your own natural inquisitiveness to drag you deeper into the mystery. It's utterly absorbing while it lasts, and as long as you're happy to drop 20 bucks on two hours' worth of adventure, it's a must-play. **OXM**

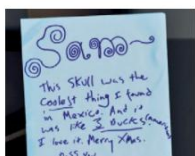
The OXM Verdict

THE BEST BIT



In 1995, school gossip relies not on WhatsApp but pieces of paper passed around the class.

COOLEST CHARACTER



SAMANTHA
Kaitlin and her sister Samantha clearly have a close relationship – but as you discover, little sis has grown up a lot.

COMPLETION CLOCK



OVERALL

Light on action and adrenaline but filled with atmosphere, this isn't your typical Xbox game – and all the more powerful for it. A luxury purchase, but an experience to savor.





REVIEWER

TOM STONE

Live OXM Tom Stone
@TheTomStrange

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?

Survival strategy that aims to show war from the civilians' perspective.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Sheltered, but with post-apocalyptic fun replaced with real war misery.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Anyone feeling guilty after their hundredth *Call of Duty* killstreak.

THIS WAR OF MINE: THE LITTLE ONES

Proves war is hell – but, it turns out, hell is well worth a visit

Dear diary, I'm currently dying in a warzone, but I'll try to keep this light. I actually ate a meal today. It was raw, and it's not exactly "digesting," but things are looking up. Now all I miss is a bed, friends, heating, safety, electricity, fun, joy, happiness and videogames. Oh God, how I miss videogames...

At least I'm not alone. Yet. You start this war with three survivors in a decrepit shelter, and you can switch control between them – like *The Sims*, but with people actually deserving of your help. You have to keep them fed, warm, rested, and safe. But by war's end, you won't care if they're depressed, ill, and starving. You'll just be desperate to keep them alive for another day, whatever the cost.

For better and for worse, very little is tutorialized. You're left to figure out your survival until the war is over (the length varies each playthrough). First you'll build obvious essentials, such as a bed and stove, then plunder the house for finite resources. You'll make defenses, vegetable gardens, water filters – the obvious goal being to make your sanctuary completely self-sufficient. It's engaging, with that *XCOM* tension of constantly wondering if you're dooming your survivors with costly construction projects.

At night, local buildings can be scavenged for essential food and resources. Many are occupied by either the armed and dangerous or vulnerable and desperate. It's up to you how you engage them. Combat controls are stiff

and clumsy (rightly so: you're a citizen, not a soldier), but all that's stopping you plundering a defenseless old couple is your own morality.

Is stealing food from one person wrong if it'll feed three more? What about taking bandages from a (currently) healthy person to save a wounded dweller? Playing with a heart of stone can depress some survivors (check the diaries regularly – you'll see who's willing to get their hands dirty), whereas helping other survivors can boost their spirits. But the game's morals are pleasingly murky. You're rarely punished directly, more often left to ponder how far you've sunk.

Days tick by fast, giving you limited time to cook meals, upgrade the shelter, make sure everyone's healthy and rested and that you've covered everything before it's time to venture out again. This gives your decision-making compelling urgency, but quiet moments can slow the pace to a crawl. "Building" something is just watching a circle slowly fill – and when that's all you're doing, it's about as exciting as watching a YouTube video buffer.

It's an uncommon flaw, as you'll rarely be so on top of everything. You'll



Misery FM

The radio is a handy tool for getting news about the war and cheering up your settlers with music. Our favorite station is the hilariously oblivious Weather FM: "The upcoming days should be nice and warm. Perfect for a stroll in the park!" Er, is that really advisable in a warzone?



REVIEW

The children get lots of charming lines – far better than the adults, who are thus harder to care about.



“Is stealing food from one person wrong if it’ll feed three more?”

want to replay this not because it’s fun, but so you can correct all the rash mistakes you made on your first attempt. If your survivors are wounded and bedridden because of your poor planning and ill-considered decisions, good luck looking away from their status screens, no matter how sedate the action gets.

If a survivor is severely hurt, they can’t scavenge. But they’re taking up a valuable bed and eating food that could feed a more “useful” survivor. Scary, how quickly you start seeing them as inconveniences. We started debating whether to try getting them better, or if we’d be better cutting our losses and focusing on the others. Maybe we shouldn’t be admitting to this in print, but it’s in our more murky

decisions that *This War of Mine* excels at showing the brutality of war.

But emotionally, it can be a little too distant. Say what you like about *The Sims*, but their constant babbling does give them character. These survivors are expressionless mutes. Losing someone should be an emotional gut punch, but it’s hard to get attached. Diaries are interesting, but are not varied enough between characters and unrelentingly bleak. Kudos to 11 Bit for not compromising its vision, but there’s a reason even *Apocalypse Now* had jokes. Even some voice acting would have gone a long way to making character deaths feel like real losses.

That’s where the titular little ones come in – the children who give the game its crucial heart. They scribble

“I wouldn’t mind hitting a humanitarian aid transport again.” Evil for the sake of evil, much?

on walls, make cute “nuh-uh” noises when you try to make them do hard labor (freeloaders), and sing as they skip around the house. Let them charm you and they bring much-needed levity, helping you to get emotionally involved. Lose a child to the emergency services (mercifully, they can’t die) and that loss is absolutely felt. Your dwelling will never feel emptier, the haunting score a reminder that you’ve lost the only cheerful sounds in your home.

Through trial and error you’ll learn what’s necessary and what you can live without. But the journey to mastery is a long one – our first run took ten hours, and didn’t end well. Write My Own Story mode lets you adjust the brutality of winter, how long the war lasts, and so on. Providing this easier mode wisely makes a tough game a lot more accessible, because this deserves to be played by any fan of tense stealth and engaging strategy. It’s no surprise that it’s taken so long for a game to show the civilian side of war. What is surprising is how fun it is to play. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

PROS/CONS

- ✓ Hard to tear yourself away
- ✓ Complex moral choices will stay with you
- ✓ Children are an inspired addition
- ✗ Adult survivors aren’t emotionally engaging
- ✗ Having to figure it out for yourself
- ✗ Can be quite slow and repetitive

THE WORST BIT



Winter is over! Shame no one lived to see the dawn of spring. Insult, meet injury.

DID YOU KNOW?

The character photos are of actual people who worked on the game. And you failed to save them. Shame on you, reader.

OVERALL

This compelling exploration of war’s human cost is also a tense strategy game, with kids giving it real heart. It’s proof you can make an engrossing game no matter how bleak the subject.

8

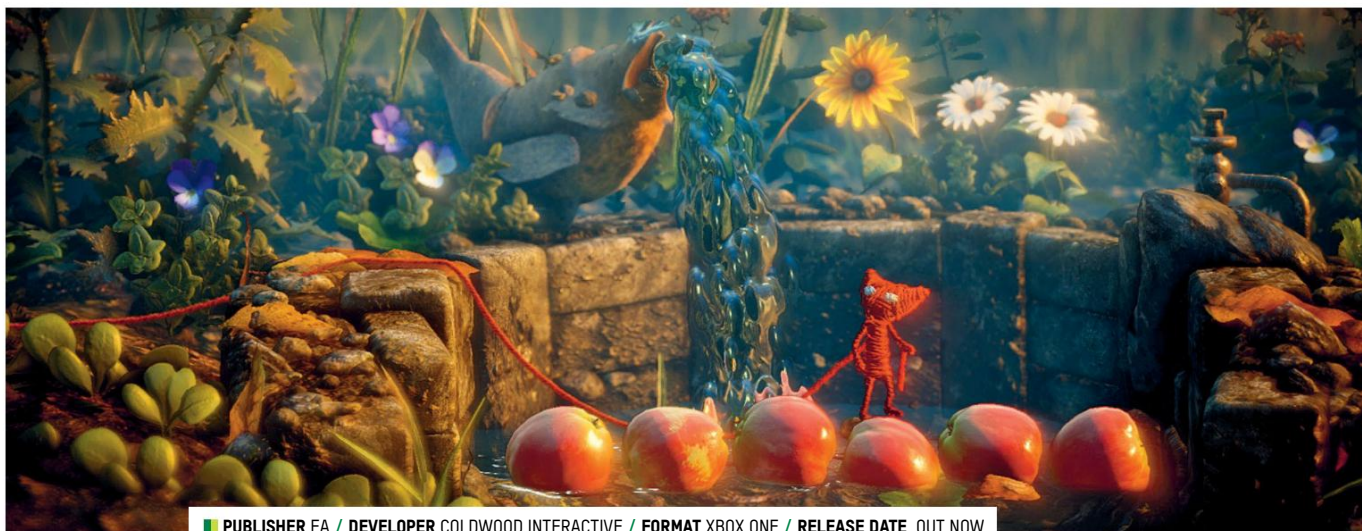
REVIEW



It's often a very lonely game. Would it kill granny to knit Yarny a buddy?



Yarny's grounded trek is broken up by mad dashes across air and water.



PUBLISHER EA / DEVELOPER COLDWOOD INTERACTIVE / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW



REVIEWER

MATTHEW CASTLE

Live OXM Pesto
mrbasil_pesto

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?

Puzzle platformer set in the countryside of northern Sweden.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Limbo with added grappling hooks, as knitted by your grandma.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Reasonably tricky platforming means it's not as kiddy as it looks.

UNRAVEL

Purled platformer adds new meaning to wooly jumper

Happiness blossoms from small, simple things." The first words we see in *Unravel*, inscribed in Coldwood's native Swedish, set the tone for a game that sees huge potential in the mundane. Not only is its hero, Yarny, a weedy scrap of ever-unspooling wool, but his diminutive size recasts the detritus of everyday life as epic obstacles. You'll skim raging oceans (ponds), take a battering ram (child's tricycle) to a gate and escape a blitzkrieg bombing run (some moody crows).

Exceptional visual design hides a more conservative physics-based puzzle platformer, not unlike *Limbo* in its focus on dragging and pushing objects into place. The ability to string up elastic platforms adds a fun twist

to the gymnastics (both physical and mental), and there's an ingenious (literal) snag in the way Yarny unravels with every step. Taking overlong routes or getting tangled on needless tethers sees him disintegrate into a wheezing skeleton. I've always thought there's something of the Devil about this horned, red creature; with his ribcage exposed he's truly worthy of Dante's *Inferno*. All the more reason to keep that body intact, I guess.

Alas, puzzles can also begin to look threadbare. Designers over-rely on a few formulas – there's a lot of pushing blocks up tightropes – while teasing us with glimpses of other, smarter ideas. Smaller set-pieces built around snowball making, cockroach scaring or powering up ancient cogs show

bursts of innovation that need meatier segments to shine. Brevity lends the game its gamboling pace, but it could do with a few more lightbulb moments of inspiration. Chewier problems are usually due to you failing to realize an object could be moved (the rules are hazy) or because you overlooked a microscopic grappling point.

But it is an easy game to forgive, thanks in part to Coldwood's charming presence. From a personalized thank you note on the title screen to landscapes torn from their own back yards, it's a sincere team effort (not to mention a technical marvel for such a small group). Annoyance may blossom from small, miserly mistakes, but most of it evaporates under the million-watt glare of Coldwood's good intentions. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

KEY INFLUENCES

70

15

15

70% *Limbo*
15% *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*
15% Your grandma's knitting

THE BEST BIT



Hidden buttons challenge your grasp of Yarny's powers and add some replayability.

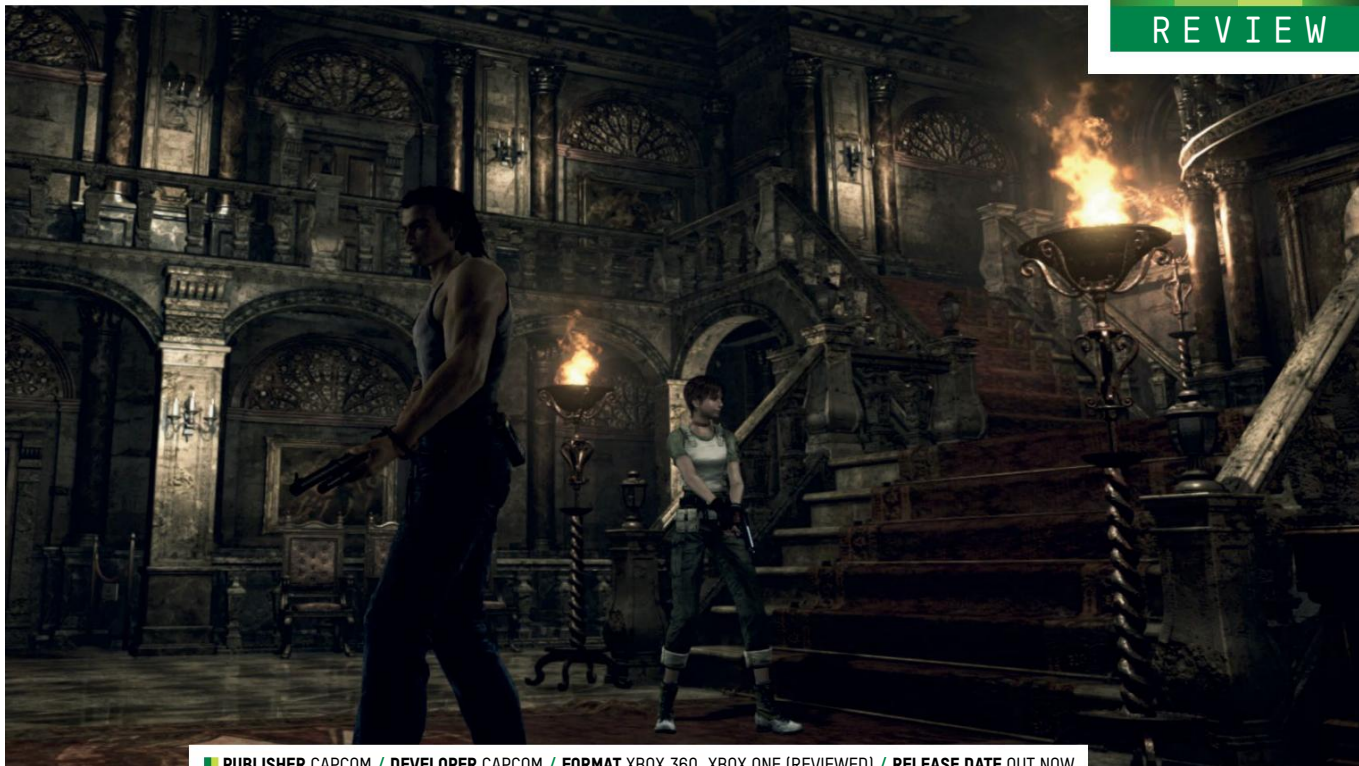
COMPLETION CLOCK

6 HOURS

OVERALL

Simple ideas knit into a beautiful platformer, if one that's too reliant on a few tricks to earn it essential status. We expect even greater things from Coldwood in the future.

8



PUBLISHER CAPCOM / DEVELOPER CAPCOM / FORMAT XBOX 360, XBOX ONE (REVIEWED) / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW



REVIEWER

TOM STONE

Live OXM Tom Stone
@TheTomStrange

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?

A remake of the 2002 GameCube game, remastered for current consoles.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Great survival horror, held back by a stupid partner-swapping mechanic.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Those who missed it the first time and have exhausted the superior first game.

RESIDENT EVIL ZERO HD

More partner-swapping than a 1970s key party

Imagine we took you for a delicious steak dinner. A wonderful treat.

Then imagine we took you for another immediately afterwards.

Two isn't always better than one, a lesson you can also learn from *Resident Evil Zero HD*. You control both S.T.A.R.S. recruit Jill Valentine and escaped convict Billy Coen as they try to escape an Umbrella training facility, switching between them at any time.

Double the characters means double the frustration. As much old-school adventure game as survival horror, most of *Zero* is spent collecting keys for solving puzzles and reaching new areas. Item management is therefore crucial, but you're given only a pathetic six inventory slots apiece. Seeing that progress relies on an item we had to

drop on the ground ten unskippable door opening cutscenes back made us scream louder than any zombie.

It's far harder to survive with two people flailing through zombie crowded corridors, and if either dies, it's game over. So your best bet is leaving one behind, restricting you to half the inventory slots. It's already a slow paced game; constantly backtracking for items and checking your partner isn't being attacked gives *Zero* all the forward momentum of a dead snail.

But there's a great *Resident Evil* in here, if you're willing to wade through the unintuitive partner-swapping. Door opening cutscenes and restricted inventories are rightly mocked today, but modern horror could learn a lot from *Zero*'s tension. Fixed camera angles

restrict your view, never giving you the full story. Often this means you hear the monsters first, and the deliberately unhelpful camera forces you to walk forward and open yourself up to attack.

These moments, where you can only hear the monsters, are *Zero* at its scariest. (Visually they're hit-and-miss: big bugs is a well the designers ran dry.) Death is swift in arguably the toughest *Resident Evil*, keeping you on edge, and you'll know it's gotten under your skin when the infected pour into rooms you started rashly associating with safety. Familiar tricks, perhaps, but they are recycled so often because they're brutally effective, even today. Few modern games are this irritating to play; fewer still are capable of such a constant sense of dread. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

THE BEST BIT



Setpieces like the mad dash to stop the train crash are brilliantly executed.

THE WORST BIT



Forget the undead, door opening cutscenes make all the required backtracking a terror.

DID YOU KNOW?

Completing the game lets you play in Wesker Mode, essentially the main game with cheats on. Nice, but fix the inventory system.

OVERALL

Looks great, sounds utterly terrifying and proves the old formula can still scare. But partner-swapping remains tedious and unintuitive. Why do a remake if you just leave the greatest flaws unfixed?

7

Gentle giant Ubin is one of the game's narrators, although he's retired from battle.

REVIEW

Ubin

Greetings, Iver. It's been quite a while since we talked, hasn't it?

PUBLISHER VERSUS EVIL / DEVELOPER STOIC / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW



REVIEWER

CHRIS SCHILLING

Live Rockin Stroll
@schillingc

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?

A story-led fantasy strategy game with a hint of Scandi-noir.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Bleak and slow like a festive trudge around Ikea, but more fun.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Anyone with a thing for strategy, survival and Scandinavian accents.

THE BANNER SAGA

This grim, gripping crusade is Nordic but nice

They say that the secret to absorbing drama is to let bad things happen to good people. That's a notion to which Stoic plainly subscribes: *The Banner Saga*, finally arriving on Xbox One two years after its PC debut, has a pitiless streak reminiscent of George RR Martin at his most brutal. Except winter isn't coming, it's well and truly here. Your journey takes you through a world carpeted in snow and shrouded in a permanent half-light, with your caravan pursued by a relentless and powerful enemy. There are dangers around every corner, and the threat of starvation looms large. It's not a comedy.

It is, however, a gripping journey, and one that carries a heft and gravitas befitting its name, even if you'll reach

your destination within 12-14 hours. It borrows a trick from Peter Jackson, showing frequent wide shots of your unmythical band trudging across bleakly beautiful territory to convey both the passage of time and the arduousness of the trek. These animated sequences – essentially wordless cutscenes – do much to convey the hardships of these weary travellers, and make you all the more determined to make their virtual lives a little easier for them.

Not that you'll often be able to help. Between the turn-based strategic battles that mark each encounter with the Dredge, a race of granite-armoured behemoths bent on your destruction, this is a game of knotty dilemmas and difficult choices. Often you're forced to rely on pure guesswork to get by.

Is a potential detour likely to yield more supplies or yet another fight for your lives? Should you welcome a newcomer to your camp, or is he likely to divide the group? You'll rarely know the answer, and yet the seemingly arbitrary outcomes feel thematically appropriate. This is, after all, a harsh, unforgiving world, and your quest naturally carries you to places unknown. Occasionally the dialog will give you a subtle hint – if a village lies abandoned, maybe there's a good reason – but usually you take a pick and hope for the best. At other times the immediate outcome is obvious, and you have the unenviable task of choosing the lesser of two evils.

The burden of such responsibility doesn't weigh as heavily as you might think, mainly because the writing is so good. It can seem a little dense and dry at first, dropping unfamiliar names and places to the point where a pen and notepad feel essential. Yet at the same time, it trusts you with the intelligence to figure some of this out for yourself, simply by paying attention during conversations and taking the time to study up on lore whenever you reach a new town or open up the map.



Eat like a Norse

Renown is the game's main currency. You'll occasionally earn it on the road, but your main source is the points you'll earn from battle. You'll need it to promote units, but it's always wise to save some for supplies – welcoming new allies en route means extra mouths to feed.

Training camps enable you to practice with new units before heading into combat.

REVIEW



“Such hardships mean moments of triumph taste all the sweeter”

Weary bones need rest, of course, but it's best not to tarry too long – not just because you have limited supplies, but because you're always at risk of the enemy catching up. The grid-based battles seem disarmingly simple at first, but an elegant setup conceals hidden depths. Each unit – human, Dredge or Varl (giants who've formed an uneasy alliance with humans) – has two key stats: armor and strength. The latter encompasses both HP and attack, but you need to crack an enemy's shield before you can inflict much damage. The trick is to balance the need to reduce their offensive potency with the desire to leave them vulnerable to, say, a special attack.

Fallen units need time to recover from their injuries, so ideally you'll

want to keep everyone alive, but unless you're playing on easy, the level of difficulty means you'll need to make the occasional sacrifice. As a result, regular rotation of your squad is crucial, unless you want to babysit a feeble low-level unit. The Varl might provide an imposing defensive barrier, but even they will soon succumb to the might of the Dredge. The key to turning the tide is judicious use of your limited supply of Willpower, which can boost move distance and attacking force. To replenish it, you'll need to blow your clan's horn – which gets topped up only when an enemy unit dies. Smart players will either corral Dredge into close proximity for a whirlwind attack that can hit several foes at once, or shepherd them into a line, so archers

Losing allies and running out of supplies will naturally lower morale. It's a real challenge to keep spirits up for long.

can use a piercing Thread the Needle attack to create a domino effect.

The pinch of budget constraints begins to show only during the final third. Battles grow repetitive, as you invariably lean on similar strategies with only a handful of new enemy types. Character models are repeated – it's disconcerting when a recruit appears to be fighting its twin – and the sense of adventure is soured by the realization that each new village is functionally identical to the last. And, on occasion, it does feel as if the fates are conspiring against you, with happenstance more likely to see your followers dying off than poor decisions.

Still, such hardships mean those rare moments of triumph taste all the sweeter, while the unusual setting and characters make for a narrative that mostly sidesteps fantasy cliché. With a sprinkling of black humor adding welcome levity and that gorgeous cartoon art giving you plenty to gape at along the way, *The Banner Saga* is pretty Viking great. **OXM**

■ The OXM Verdict

THE BEST BIT



Oddly, it might be the moments where you're simply watching the world pass by.

COOLEST CHARACTER



NID
Optional recruit Nid is a resourceful mother of three who becomes a lethal sniper in the latter stages.

COMPLETION CLOCK



OVERALL

It's taken a long time to get here, but Stoic's engrossing strategy adventure is worth the wait, conjuring a rich, wintry atmosphere in a world as handsome as it is hopeless.

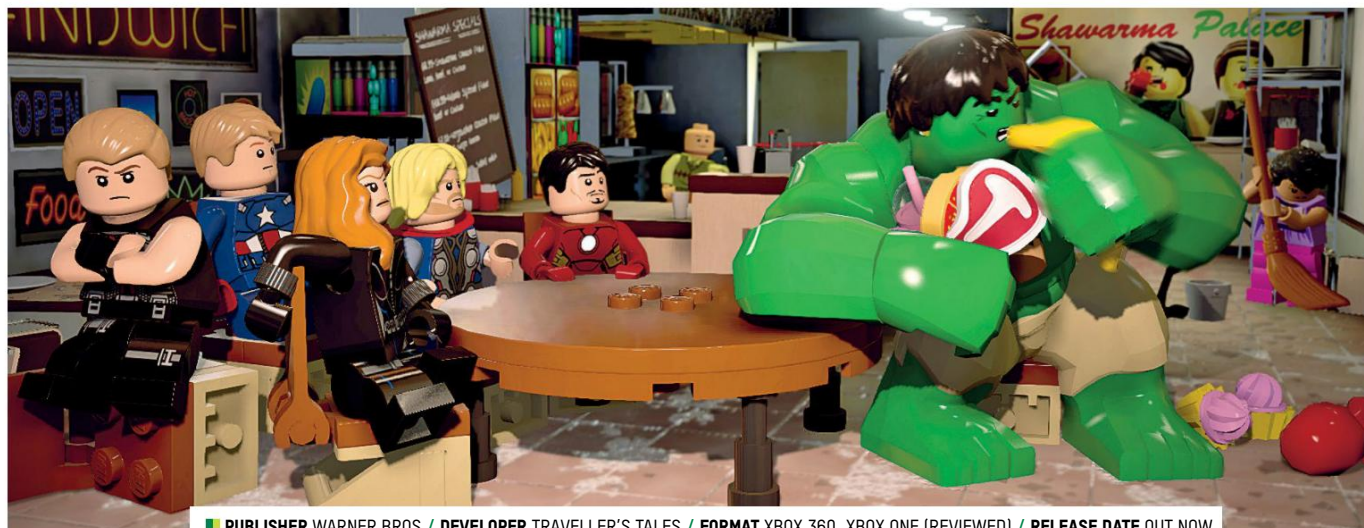


REVIEW

Hoorah! Toys finally include Black Widow! Shown here, er, cleaning up...



Create-a-hero finally gives us the pink-armed glowstick-waving Iron Man of our dreams.



PUBLISHER WARNER BROS / DEVELOPER TRAVELLER'S TALES / FORMAT XBOX 360, XBOX ONE (REVIEWED) / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW



REVIEWER

TOM STONE
Live OXM Tom Stone
@TheTomStrange

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?

Lego platformer that covers every Marvel film from *Assemble* to *Age of Ultron*.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Previous Lego games, but with improved combat and less obtuse puzzles.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Fans of the films happy to hear the same lines again.

LEGO MARVEL'S AVENGERS

Saving the world, one brick at a time

Didn't he just use to make cameos? There are so many collectables, unlockable costumes and whole scenes featuring Stan Lee in *Marvel's Avengers*, he's practically the star. His constant presence and cries of 'excelsior!' will either charm you or make you want to hurt him. We hope it's the former, because this might be the best Lego game yet. Also because we don't want you to hurt Stan Lee.

Lego combat (finally) sees an improvement, with every character getting a special takedown: Loki turns invisible and then attacks from behind; Hulk rages out on any goon foolish enough to pick a fight with him. Even better are team-up moves, like having Thor strike Captain America's shield for

a killer shockwave. You'll want to try more Avengers just to see them all.

One minute you'll be shooting arrows and kicking Hydra agents to blocks as Hawkeye and Black Widow, the next the action will fly to Hulk and Thor, and you with it. Frequent switching between pairs keeps the pace up, and levels show a keen eye for cinematic action. Set-pieces, like the battle for New York, use slow-motion, explosions and Lego pedestrians running around screaming to capture the mad buzz of a superhero blockbuster. There's little filler here – Traveller's Tales skips to iconic scenes and focuses on getting them right.

It's a shame that the production values falter at the voice acting. The main cast's audio is ripped from the films, and with no new dialogue we're

left with surprisingly straight retellings of *Assemble* and *Age of Ultron*. Lines aren't even recorded well, with music fading out as we strain to hear another whisper-quiet Robert Downey Jr quip.

Limited by the dialogue, TT settles for visual gags, like Thanos listening to his own *Guardians of the Galaxy*-style mix tapes, and even a kiss between Hulk and Tony Stark. Frequently funny and always charming, we still wish this franchise had gotten the full *Lego Batman*-style skewering it deserved.

But it's hard to stay disappointed at a game so generous. Over a hundred characters, huge hub worlds full of fun side quests ('can you defy Odin by taking a selfie on his throne as the Hulk?') and the finest Lego gameplay yet. Excelsior, indeed. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

COOLEST CHARACTER



THE UNBEATABLE SQUIRREL GIRL
Bet every superhero wishes they'd been clever enough to put 'unbeatable' in their names.

THE BEST BIT



Chris Hemsworth's plastic performance arguably works better in Lego form.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

A Season Pass' worth of DLC is on the way, adding levels based on *Ant-Man* and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*

OVERALL

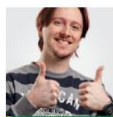
A terrific superhero toy box shows TT doesn't need a glowing toy pad to entertain. Just great action, a love of superhero cinema, and not one overpriced level pack in sight.

8

There are some stone-cold classic cars to buy or rent, like this Toyota Celica.



PUBLISHER MILESTONE S.R.L. / DEVELOPER MILESTONE / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW



REVIEWER

JUSTIN TOWELL

Live CatGoneCrazy
@CatGoneCrazy

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?

A rally sim featuring additional challenges from Sébastien Loeb's career.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Being lost in a field with an overly vocal satnav.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Hardcore rally enthusiasts. And fans of Sébastien will love it.

SÉBASTIEN LOEB RALLY EVO

The car isn't the star, Sébastien is

As a tribute to the greatest rally driver of all time (statistically, at least), this is a great product. After a few hours of career mode, you unlock the "Loeb Experience," where English-dubbed, close-up video interviews with the man himself introduce every stage of his glittering career in admirable detail, and you get to try the best bits yourself. Add in career mode's events and licenced cars and this should be a winner, but it can't quite compete with the best.

The point-to-point rally stages are the centerpiece and can be a real blast, especially in flowing sections when you can get your foot down, grimace, and trust that your co-driver brought the right pace notes. But

the low-speed handling is clumsy, with unsatisfying cornering that very rarely feels like you got a turn just right. The physics engine is at its most convincing during snow stages, where you get to do some scandalous powersliding, but on more solid ground it doesn't feel assured or realistic.

Elsewhere, the game itself feels just plain unfinished. The load times are too long, the cars' wheels sometimes hover above the track in replays, and we had our fender-cam obscured by bodywork even in undamaged cars. There are severe framerate drops, particularly at night and in replays, which is frustrating because when it's running properly it has moments of real beauty.

The damage system is good, with pleasantly fragile cars that bash up

well, but you can save your blushes with the obligatory rewind button. That's tempered by a cool-off timer so you can't continually keep trying the same corner – a good idea.

Career mode is vast, and not limited to point-to-points, with rallycross events offering close-contact multi-car racing as well as time challenges and elimination games. But the game would probably be better if it didn't have the races. Rival cars literally vanish if you get too close to them in fender-cam, and the whole affair feels tacked-on.

Despite the generational divide, *DIRT 3* is still superior in every area, even including graphics, and since that's backwards compatible, it's hard to recommend this for anyone except ardent fans of Monsieur Loeb. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

OBJECT OF DESIRE



SWEET CHARIOT

The Peugeot 208 T16 Pike's Peak Test Car has a 10/10 performance rating and is worth unlocking.

PROS/CONS

- ✓ Good sensation of speed
- ✓ Loads of cars and tracks
- ✓ Easy to get started

- ✗ Technical issues with camera
- ✗ Lightweight handling model
- ✗ Feels like a last-gen game

BEST PRICE

\$
59.99
BESTBUY

OVERALL

Challenge mode is a real fan-pleaser and the fastest rally stages are fun and pretty. But it feels clumsy at low speed, has some severe technical issues, and rallycross events are poor.

6

REVIEW



With no cursor, you're forced to rely on your instincts for where the center of the screen is.

You don't need to finish every stage to progress. Phew. Level 2-20 was driving us mad.



PUBLISHER TINY BUILD GAMES / DEVELOPER QUICKTEQUILA / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW



REVIEWER

CHRIS SCHILLING

Live Rockin Stroll
@schillingc

THE KNOWLEDGE

WHAT IS IT?

A first-person speedrunning shooter that's much harder than it looks.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Cheap presentation belies a stern test of your FPS skills.

WHO'S IT FOR?

"Beyond the hardships lies accomplishment." Agree? Give *Lovely Planet* a shot.

LOVELY PLANET

Quake meets Katamari – you won't believe what happens next!

Make yourself a swear jar, prepare a mug of your favorite hot beverage, sit down with *Lovely Planet*, and by lunchtime you'll have enough in the jar to afford that vacation in Belize you always promised yourself. Oh, sure, *Lovely Planet* looks inviting enough – all pillowy clouds, floating beachballs and love hearts strewn across grassy platforms. But as early as its second set of 20 stages, it becomes a viciously tough test of twitch reflexes and patience. Don't take that as a criticism, more a forewarning: the planet may be lovely, but your language is unlikely to be.

This colourful FPS is designed for speedrunning. There are enemies to shoot, and you'll need to off them all to

successfully complete each stage. But you're not going to be ducking behind cover and peeking out to pop off a few rounds. Rather, you're in constant motion, attempting to beat a strict par time to reach the end of the stage.

To which end, you'll jump up steps and over gaps by squeezing the left trigger, and use the bumper on the same side to snap your aim to the nearest enemy: they're not ones for leaving their post, but chunkier units will gob blocky projectiles at you. Red blobs don't count as enemies, but will slop towards you or block your route, so you'll have to dodge or blast them. Not that you should be firing haphazardly, as taking out friendly blue critters and crucial mid-air platforms prematurely ends your run. And then

there are the apples, which are launched when you get within a certain range, and must be shot before they hit terra firma – and which will likely cause you to swear off Braeburns for life.

And that's about it. The ingredients don't change much, but the challenge quickly steepens until you're being asked to shoot three apples out of the sky mid-jump. Instant restarts and a cheery soundtrack alleviate some of the frustration of screwing up, but while the controls are nearly perfect, audiovisual feedback is distinctly lacking, and when you're facing a cluster of red things, you'd be wise not to rely on that left bumper. Still, if you can maintain your composure, you'll find this a cleverly designed, irresistibly addictive test of skill and nerve. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

THE BEST BIT



Finally conquering a stage brings about an intoxicating sensation of euphoric relief.

PRO TIP



Using LB to snap aim to enemies is crucial, but it's better to manually aim at apples.

DID YOU KNOW?

? *Lovely Planet* is mostly the work of designer and programmer Vidhvat Madan, with a catchy soundtrack by Calum Bowen.

OVERALL

Don't be fooled by the rudimentary looks – *Lovely Planet* is a tough cookie. As a twitch game, it suffers from poor feedback and imprecision, but its snappy pace keeps you hooked.

6

Occasionally there'll be an explosion.
Probably to try to wake you up.



■ FORMAT XBOX ONE / REVIEWER TOM STONE / PRICE \$19.99

ZHEROS

Someday factory jobs will be obsolete, when we finally build robots capable of doing manual labor for us. We'll kick back as they toil away, day and night, plotting to destroy their lazy human masters and take the planet for themselves. For an exciting preview of that glorious future, download *Zheros*. For a more exciting game, try playing Scrabble. Alone.

You run through levels, fighting robots with kick attacks and gun blasts. The gun has a strict cooldown, which is about as

tactical as *Zheros* gets. It's just endless robot kicking, with the occasional bit of repetitive platforming to spice things up. The combat itself is utterly unremarkable, as you hammer the kick button until the bots' health bar depletes. Very occasionally a new enemy type enters the mix, but levels usually just throw more robots at you. Maybe the robots designed this to entertain themselves? Either that or it's part of their plot to destroy our minds.

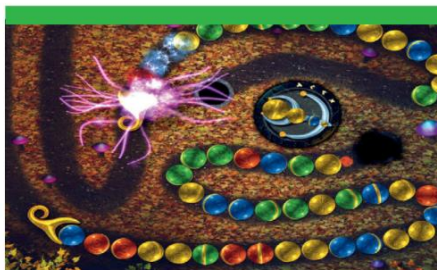
4

REVIEW

ALSO RELEASED

Condensed criticism of the other new games in shops and on Xbox Live

Visit gamesradar.com/oxm for the full reviews



■ FORMAT XBOX ONE / REVIEWER MARTIN KITTS / PRICE \$7.99

SPARKLE 2

In the beginning (1998) there was *Puzz Loop*, which was later renamed *Ballistic* and then *Magnetica*. A very simple color-matching puzzle game, it spawned so many imitators that it's pretty much a genre of its own.

So if you've played the likes of *Zuma*, *Luxor*, or any previous *Sparkle* games – one of which came out on Xbox One just last summer – you know what to expect. A long line of colored marbles shuffles towards a hole, and you fire other marbles into the midst of them to match three. This version is just as empty addictive as any of its precursors. The difficulty level is set very low, and there's a hypnotic quality to it that quickly turns one more level into a dozen. Mildly diverting for an hour or two.

6



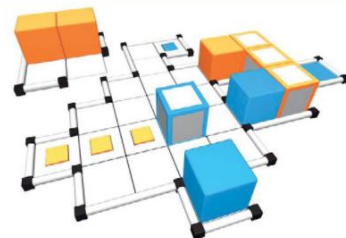
■ FORMAT XBOX ONE / REVIEWER MARTIN KITTS / PRICE \$14.99

FORTIFIED

Tower defense meets third-person shooter with a 1950s SF vibe, *Fortified* is like a simplified *Toy Soldiers*. You control one of four characters. You set up soldiers, turrets and traps, then defend your base from waves of aliens coming down preset paths. If any get through, you must mop 'em up using small arms and charge-uppable special abilities.

The boxy levels are bland and the aliens offer little feedback, simply dissolving when they've taken enough punishment. If your guy dies you can quickly respawn, and exploring other characters means going right back to the start and grinding through the dull early stages. Nice idea, but *Toy Soldiers* does almost all this does, bigger and better.

5



■ FORMAT XBOX ONE / REVIEWER MARTIN KITTS / PRICE \$1.99

CUBOT

Cubot is the kind of thing you've probably downloaded for pennies on your mobile device many times, played for half an hour before getting stuck, then abandoned.

The aim is to move colored blocks onto same-colored squares. Simple enough at first. But then it starts throwing in blocks that move two squares at a time, blocks that move in reverse, or switches, lifts, etc. The thumbstick moves all the blocks at the same time, and just when you think the last piece is in place, something gets messed up in another corner of the level. Rewind a few turns and try again, or press the Home button and load up one of 20 other stylish but annoying puzzle games as if you're on your phone.

5



PUBLISHER MICROSOFT / DEVELOPER 343 INDUSTRIES / FORMAT XBOX ONE / ORIGINAL SCORE 9/10

HALO 5: GUARDIANS – FORGE

The Cartographer's Gift brings us a taste of what it's like to be a Halo 5 developer



REVIEWER
Martin Kitts
LIVE calistan
@... nope

WE SAID

A multiplayer that at first appears slight reveals the kind of nuances that come from good design.

It's an unusual thing to have in a premium multiplayer FPS. A unique thing, even. A mode where players can take time out from rifle-butting each other in the face and spend hours peacefully slotting together maps, like giant virtual building blocks.

Forge started as a bit of fun in *Halo 3* that proved unexpectedly popular. You could add pieces to a level and change parameters while your friends ran around and tested it, and from this sprang new modes and maps that eventually made it into the main game. Subsequent

games made improvements to the mapmaking tools and increased how much you could Forge before the framerate became a slideshow. Some fantastic stuff has come out of it, but one thing you could guarantee is that you could tell at a glance whether a map had been Forged.

Halo 5's Forge changes that, to startling effect. We may have had to wait a while for it to be added to the game, in December's

hefty Cartographer's Gift update, but it's easy to see why it took so long. This is basically the tool used by 343 Industries to create several of the maps that shipped with the base game. Until you load up one of those maps and start to dismantle it, you might not have realized it was constructed in Forge. With a wide variety of shapes and lighting effects, Forge maps have a bespoke look that's not far off the quality of the hand-sculpted levels. We've certainly come a long way since the days of *Reach's* dull grey blocks.

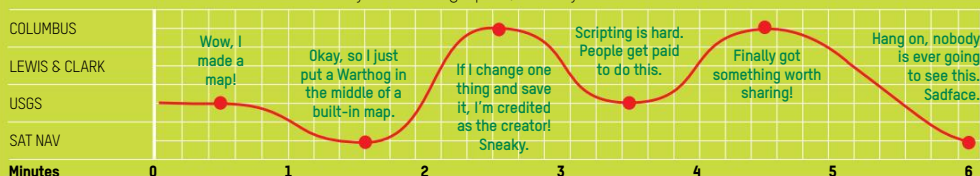
There are three main canvases to Forge on – a grassy one, an

icy one, and one that's empty apart from a space backdrop. What you do there is limited only by your imagination (and your mastery of a brain-melting array of development tools). At a basic level, moving blocks and creating structures is easier than in past Forges. You can manipulate groups of blocks at once, which is handy if you need to pull some objects away from a wall. Unique objects can be welded together from primitive shapes, and entire chunks can be duplicated to create symmetrical layouts.

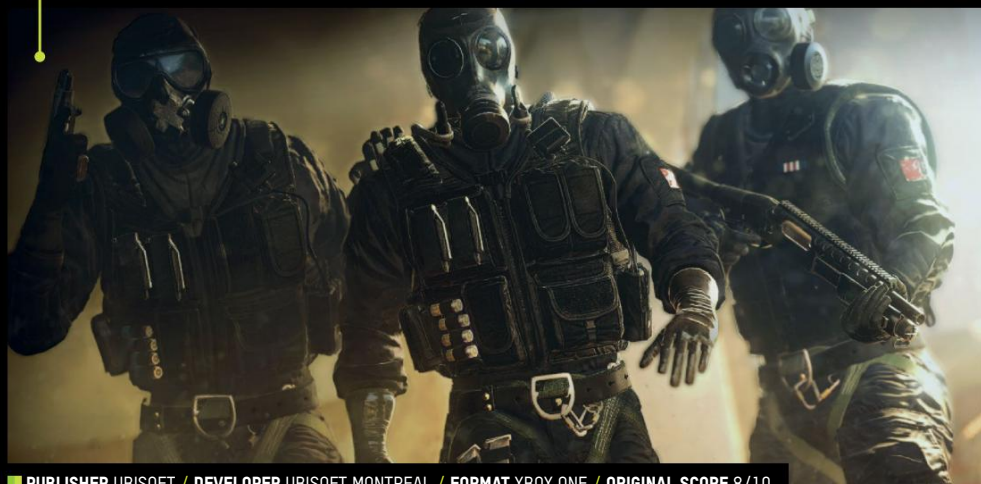
Beneath the surface there's a huge amount of scripting that can be added – buttons that operate garage doors, traps that trigger landslides, secret rooms with power weapons... you can pretty much program

"We've certainly come a long way since the days of *Reach's* dull grey blocks"

ARE WE HAVING FUN YET? Our first day as a cartographer, in wavy line form



Introducing the new operator: Chafe. Special ability: to endure the endless rubbing of those crotch belts.



PUBLISHER UBISOFT / DEVELOPER UBISOFT MONTREAL / FORMAT XBOX ONE / ORIGINAL SCORE 8/10

RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

You're a hostage to lobby fortune in this blistering blaster



REVIEWER
Matthew Castle
LIVE OXM Pesto
@mrbasil_pesto

WE SAID

Clever and compelling multiplayer that transplants classic Rainbow Six into a modern shooter.

Welcome, recruit, to the hardened world of special forces operators. Toughest of the tough. Meanest of the mean. Bounciest of the bouncy. What?

No, our eyes do not deceive us. Spetsnaz's bombmaker is cavorting on a bed while members of the SAS and FBI stand by, hooting with laughter.

Just as an attacker may not know what lies on the other side of the breaching charge, so no *Siege* player can predict what they will find in any lobby. *Siege* may be limited on paper – two modes and a glorified tutorial – but its lunatic inhabitants whip up startling scenarios.

In another round we face something scarier than a

Kevlar-sponsored pyjama party: a member of the opposing team murders his four colleagues in 20 seconds. We chuckle at our good fortune only for five-against-one to become four-against-one. Three-against-one. Two... all of a sudden we're the last man standing, facing off against the psychopath who has killed eight tactical specialists in two minutes and is now audibly shuffling inches from our position. *Siege* is a tense game when you aren't up against a xenomorph in German tactical gear. This is a far greater monster than the wobbly *Evolve* ever managed to cook up.

This is the beauty of *Siege*: the sparse back-of-the-box feature list gives you mental room to devise scare tactics and

harebrained schemes of your own design. Of course, it's reliant on others playing their part. For every hilarious, terrifying, or surgical happening there are countless matches where you're forced to play as the vanilla Rookie because your unlocked characters are spoken for (a result of the agonizing unlock rate), or you see your plans scuppered by a dummy who hasn't played the tutorial. A piece of advice for newbies: when the objective is to save the hostage, don't pick the operator with the ability to pump a room full of grenades.

Sadly, if other players don't disappoint, the servers often will. Woes continue two months after launch, with many matches hanging in the lobby, or the game refusing to find you a match at all. Terrorhunt is a, well, terror for this.

You had one job, Ubisoft. If you're going to sell a multiplayer mode for \$60, said multiplayer mode has to be flawless. **OXM**

this to do anything, assuming you have the talent.

Finding other players' Forge work is more difficult than it needs to be. The current lack of a file browser means you're forced to jump through hoops in order to sample the latest stuff. While a recently added Forge playlist goes some way towards spotlighting a handful of the community's best creations, the only way to see anything else is to read about it on a forum and friend/follow its creator.

As it stands, this otherwise amazing game-modding tool exists in a partial vacuum. With any luck a browser will be patched in, but until then you'll need to promote yourself outside of the game if you want anyone to notice your work. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

The biggest Forge yet, but even *Halo 3* back in 2007 made it easier for you to share your work.

8



In reality you never get four bodies this close to each other. Not living ones, anyway.



The OXM Verdict

When the pieces align, this is as enlightening as a flashbang to the face, but server problems persist.

7

ON THE DOWNLOAD

Latest add-ons and indie games rated



PUBLISHER WARNER BROS / DEVELOPER ROCKSTEADY / FORMAT XBOX ONE / REVIEWER TOM STONE / PRICE \$39.99

BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT – SEASON PASS

A season pass with all the spark of Batman and Robin

Gliding over Gotham was never more satisfying than when the city had completely fallen apart. Banks being robbed, buildings aflame, armed militia gunning through the streets – *Arkham Knight* captured the madness better than any comic book, film or game before it. So when the season pass was announced, it seemed like a no-brainer. \$39.99 was steep, but all Rocksteady had to do was add more chaos, villains and *life* to Gotham, break nothing in the process, and it'd be essential.

It wasn't. Instead we got short "Arkham episodes" – new adventures for characters like Catwoman and Nightwing that could be completed in less time than they took to download. More Racetracks, but separate from the main game and with no

Riddler commentary, removing most of their charm. Challenge maps – a fun distraction but, with none of the narrative drive of *Knight's* main campaign, soon repetitive. The majority of the season pass felt like shallow filler. Hugely disappointing.

But the Season of Infamy concludes the season pass on a high note. It brings Mad Hatter, Mr Freeze, Killer Croc and the League of Shadows to Gotham. Freeze is blackmailed by the militia to kill Batman, and the end of his story is one of *Arkham Knight's* most satisfying arcs yet. That Rocksteady can wring genuine pathos out of a character with so goofy a name is a testament to its talent. Mad

//Disappointingly, the majority of the season pass felt like shallow filler//

Hatter never quite escapes his Scarecrow-lite C-list villain status, but still has some smart hallucinatory tricks up his sleeves. Killer Croc's prison ship – and the horrifying experiments within – are a great last hurrah for dual team combat. And the League of Shadows mission is a compelling mix of detection and

combat, with a moral choice that tests Batman's core principles more than anything in the main story.

It's an outstanding few hours back in Gotham, a reminder of why *Arkham Knight* was a why-so-serious contender for game of the year. It's just a pity we had to endure the gaming equivalent of five months in The Pit to get there. **OXM**

The OXM Verdict

Get the Season of Infamy pack for a perfect Arkham epilog. As for purchasing the whole season? Pass.

6



Batman won't rest until he's hunted down the irredeemable criminal who overpriced his DLC.



ALSO RELEASED

From best to worst, the latest additions to Xbox Live Marketplace



1 JUST CAUSE 3 – EXPLOSIVE WEAPON PACK

Like *JC3* more explosive? Get this/get help.

Price: £3.99



2 RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER – PROPHET'S LEGACY

A fireproof outfit, a new dagger, rare cards. Never lose a knife fight/poker game again.

Price: \$2.99



3 THE ESCAPISTS – SANTA'S SWEATSHOP

Escape Santa's cruel regime in this perfect solution to the post-holiday blues.

Price: FREE



4 FORZA MOTORSPORT 6 – POLO RED CAR PACK

Seven new cars to race and weep that you'll never afford them in real life.

Price: \$6.99



5 BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT – ROCKSTEADY THEMED BATMOBILE SKIN

Pimp your ride with little bats all over. Bats.

Price: FREE



6 CHIVALRY – BARBARIAN CHARACTER PACK

What better way to play *Chivalry* than with Barbarians? It's *Chivalry*, so just don't play.

Price: \$7.99

The Force doesn't so much awaken as roll over and go back to sleep again.



■ **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **REVIEWER** PAUL RANDALL / **PRICE** \$4.99 (BASE GAME FREE)

Hey, go ahead and cross the streams. Makes no difference.



■ **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **REVIEWER** PAUL RANDALL / **PRICE** \$29.99

PINBALL FX 2 - STAR WARS PINBALL: THE FORCE AWAKENS

Star Wars is ideal for a pinball table, with its iconic sound effects lifting score-chasing to euphoric heights. The film's opening crawl even looks like a pinball table. Just add a pair of flippers! Sadly, the two tables here do not quite tap this magic.

The titular table is a stubby, claustrophobic affair with little place for a ball to go other than the wall of lanes up top. It's left to a cast of puppets around the table to add drama – so you see Rey picking over engines as you fire the ball round a ramp, or searching for BB-8 as you... fire the ball round the same ramp. Later "scenes" transform the table dramatically, but the core routes feel the same. It doesn't even work as fan-service, with budget voice actors barking out unrecognizable

lines. Next to Zen's outstanding *Empire Strikes Back* 2013 table, this is undercooked.

The second table, *Might of the First Order*, suffers from a similar fidelity issue – General Hux plain sux, and the ball itself makes a more convincing Captain Phasma. But the game underneath is more interesting: its sunken sub-table, we'd like to think, signifies the hidden glimmer of good that Kylo

Ren so wrestles with, but is more likely just a good place to earn the multiball. It can be tricky to differentiate

//It's left to a cast of puppets around the table to add drama//

the two layers, but generally it's a fun, breezy table, with more room to express yourself (well, as much as you can with two flippers) than the stuffy dunes of Jakku.

Of course, the smart move is to buy the original *Star Wars Pinball*, with its ace *Empire* table. **OXM**



■ The OXM Verdict

Kudos for not erasing Rey from the fiction, but the tables don't convince as fan-service or as tests of skill.



LEGO DIMENSIONS - GHOSTBUSTERS LEVEL PACK

You know who would hate *Legos Dimensions*? Peter Venkman. It's just the kind of clean-cut, marketeer-driven product he'd despise. It's the Walter Peck of videogames. And, sadly, the *Ghostbusters* add-on sees it at its most uptight.

The story mission is a retelling of the film, whipping us on a tour of the firehouse, a Slimer-haunted hotel and Gozer's rooftop arrival. But once you've seen how sets translate into Lego, there's nothing to break the monotony of ghostbustin' – the add-on set includes a trap you sit on the *Dimensions* dais to bag any spooks corralled on-screen – or the low quality of soundbites ripped from aging films.

Worse, a miserly hour of play is itself padded with a retreat of the story mode's *Ghostbusters*

level, dumping you in the same bland NY streets to kick apart bike racks and bus stops in your endless hunt for studs. It was the feeblest stage of the main game and is even worse with a \$30 tag.

Venkman's figure also opens his respective Adventure World. Where previous themed areas had real fun crushing, say, all of Middle Earth into one square mile, the *Ghostbusters* sandbox is just some ugly New York apartment blocks roamed by unofficial voice actors hoping to unload tasks on you.

//You're dumped in the same bland NY streets to kick apart bike racks//

Wanna shoot five ghosts for not-quite-Annie-Potts? How about collecting five monsters for sort-of-Rick-Moranis? This is not the stuff fan dreams are made of.

It's not quite as apocalyptic as cats and dogs living together, but it's certainly not worth \$30. **OXM**



■ The OXM Verdict

Turns out that *Ghostbusters* isn't a great match for the Lego formula. Go rewatch the films instead.



Indie Roundup / The latest hidden gems and DIY disasters



JAWESOME THE 3RD
Swim around catching sharks in 3D so ghastly that an N64 would refuse to run it. Jucking Jerrible.



CRAWLERS AND BRAWLERS
NES style Roguelike, with lovely 2D graphics that washed *Jawesome's* awful 3D from our eyes.



TUNNEL LORDS
Tunnel deep underground for rocks and minerals. Leave this crud down there while you're at it.



ADVENTURES IN TEXT
Made us regret learning to read. Seek out the excellent *Hitchhiker's Guide* text adventure instead.



SPACE ASSAULT DRAGSTAR
A drag of a 3D shooter that looks like it had a budget of 14 cents. Shoulda kept the money.

15

GREATEST XBOX
ROMANCES

In honor of Valentine's Day, we've wept joyful tears and braved awkward polygonal sex scenes to bring you Xbox's 15 greatest ever romances

Games aren't exactly famed for their ability to conjure up the feelings we get from movies' soppiest rom-coms or heartfelt dramas. More often than not, what we get are a few moments where a bald man shouts "I will save you" at a screaming woman being carried away and, later, that weird thing where character models

are supposed to be kissing, but it just looks like one's trying to shove their head inside their lover's mouth. Which is precisely why the entries on this list are so special – every one gets at least something about romance actually right.

Of course, what with many romances being the entire driving force behind plotlines, you can expect some mild spoilers throughout.

Mr lover man:
Joe Skrebels



01

THE HALO SERIES

MASTER CHIEF AND CORTANA

Chief and 'tana, sitting in a tree, I-N-T-E-R-F-A-C-I-N-G

You might think meeting The One on Tinder is tough, but try telling that to the guy whose girlfriend is the digitized personality of a one-armed scientist, who's also blue and lives in his skull. Gaming's greatest will they/ won't they/can they couple, Cortana and Chief were meant for each other – by which we mean she monitored every aspect of his body and mind for years before deciding he was neurally perfect for her.



02

THE MASS EFFECT SERIES

COMMANDER SHEPARD AND ALMOST EVERYONE

Shepard and [insert name here], in the galaxy, probably committing big-a-my

By sheer weight of numbers, Commander Shepard is the most romantic individual in gaming history. Over the course of three games, most players had just about sawn off Shepard's bedpost with notches, bedding everyone from aliens to a digital facsimile of Jessica Chobot. It's enough to melt your heart.

THE GEARS OF WAR SERIES

DOM AND MARIA SANTIAGO

Dom and Maria, sitting in debris, W-E-E-P-I-N-G

Sometimes you don't realize the depth of a romance until it comes to a sudden and brutal end. We'd always taken *Gears*' swaggering, tatt-heavy gunman, Dom, for a bit of a dolt. But the portion of *Gears* 2 that sees him search for his beloved wife, rejoice at finding her, then have his world crushed by her violent torture at the hands of the cruel Locust is probably the most memorable in Epic's series so far. That he never quite recovered (his *Gears* 3 exit is pretty bold, too) is testament to how powerful a moment that was.



03



04

BRAID

TIM AND THE PRINCESS

R-E-V-E-R-S-I-N-G, borked chronology, Tim and Princess

Who said romance needs to be a nice thing? *Braid* makes reversal a game mechanic and a commentary on game design. Our hero, Tim, spends an entire game trying to rescue his Princess, in order to make up for some unspecified mistake, eventually saving her from a dastardly knight in the final stage... until the level's reversed and we realise she's actually been running from Tim the entire time. In *Braid*'s case, romance gone too far simply becomes obsessive stalking.

THE WITCHER SERIES

GERALT AND YENNEFER

Geralt and Yen'fer, fighting a genie, nobody tell her 'bout Triss and me...

Depending on how you progressed through *The Witcher III*, this one's debatable – but let's assume you make all the right choices. Long before the games begin, Geralt meets Yennefer during an attack from a djinn. For complex reasons, it's assumed that he has been 'cursed' with love for her. For years they bump into one another, going through a stormy on-off relationship – until they meet another djinn in the final game, dispel the curse and remain committed to one another.



05



THE DARKNESS SERIES
**JACKIE ESTACADO
AND JENNY ROMANO**

Jackie and Jenny, on a
settee, watching a film
that's copyright-free

Forget their lifelong love after ending up in the same orphanage as kids, or Jenny's tragic death – Jackie and Jenny's romance is best shown by the fact that you can choose to sit on the couch with her for movie night, in real time. Their small talk and snuggles, while *To Kill A Mockingbird* plays out in full, perfectly capture the feel of a couple in the grip of normality. It works as a perfect counterpoint to all hell breaking loose, quite literally, for the rest of the game.



BIONIC COMMANDO
NATHAN 'RAD' SPENCER AND HIS ARM

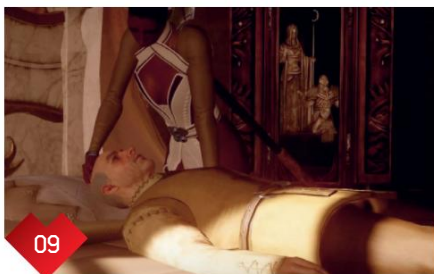
Nathan and his own arm, after surgery,
A-C-R-I-M-E-A-G-A-I-N-S-T-N-A-T-U-R-E

A remake of a game that once bore the title *Hitler's Resurrection* is perhaps not an obvious wellspring of romantic feeling, but that simply reveals our prejudices. Spencer is a man on a mission, with only his own high-functioning robot limb to protect him. In a spectacular twist, it's explained why said limb is so proficient at keeping him safe – his arm is made out of his late wife. Don't ask how that works, or what that means for more... physical expressions of love. We don't know, and don't care to know.

— PRINCE OF PERSIA: SANDS OF TIME —
**THE PRINCE AND
PRINCESS FARAH**

Persian royals, using sand to
flee, F-R-E-E-R-U-N-N-I-N-G

Sacrifice is as much a part of love as indulgence, and the *Sands of Time* twist is a perfect example. After an entire game growing to know and love the endangered Princess Farah, The Prince realizes that the only way to truly save her is to rewind time back to the night before the affair started – erasing their entire romance for her, but keeping his memories intact. Upon saving her, he fails to convince Farah that his fantastical story is true, and steals into the jungle, alone.



DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION
**VIVIENNE AND
DUKE BASTIEN
DE GHISLAIN**

Viv and Basty, doing alchemy,
hoping for imm-or-tal-i-ty

Vivienne flies in the face of BioWare's previous work. She's rude, guarded and, horror of horrors, laughs in your face if you try and flirt with her. And that's the point. Eventually we find out that she's not only taken, but heartbroken – her love, a once-dashing duke, has an incurable disease, and not even her skills in magic and alchemy can save him. Vivienne's story is a paean to true, long-lasting romance.

— GRAND THEFT AUTO V —
**TREVOR PHILLIPS
AND PATRICIA
MADRAZO**

Trevor and Patricia, in an RV,
T-A-B-O-O-B-R-E-A-K-I-N-G

Trevor is a man of unexpected tastes. We'd spent most of the game watching him do the weirdest things possible, but we're not sure anyone foresaw a star cross'd romance between him and the mature wife of a Los Santos kingpin. Not least after he'd kidnapped her. She's more or less the only individual in the world that Trevor is in no way a total douchebag towards – proof that love conquers all.



RED DEAD REDEMPTION

JOHN AND
ABIGAIL MARSTONJohn and Abigail,
temptation rides on by,
F-I-D-E-L-I-T-Y

John Marston's a man who never wanted to be a hero, never mind the kind of hero who turns up in a Rockstar game. And yet he's sucked in by forces beyond his control – he kills, he drinks, he gambles and he swears. But, crucially, he never cheats. While *Red Dead Redemption's* world might feel like *Deadwood*, John never gives into its baser temptations, and returns to his wife as in love with her as the day he was forced to leave.



11



12

LOLLIPOP CHAINSAW

JULIET STARLING
AND NICK CARLYLEJuliet and Nick,
his head swinging free,
C-H-A-I-N-S-A-W-I-N-G

We can't discount young love, just for being a new experience. Take Juliet and Nick, the latter of whom is bitten by a zombie and subsequently gets decapitated, made the subject of an immortality ritual and spends the entire game strapped to the former's waist. In doing so, the two teens learn a thing or two about sacrifice, cooperation and interdimensional war.

LIFE IS STRANGE

MAX CAULFIELD
AND CHLOE PRICEMax and Chloe,
chasing down a lead,
I-N-V-E-S-T-I-G-A-T-I-N-G

Not even taking into account the full romantic subplot in Dontnod's adventure, Max and Chloe's relationship is probably gaming's greatest exploration of platonic love. From rediscovering their friendship right through to the devastating conclusion, Max and Chloe's friendship often outstrips the time-hopping storyline, leaving us far more interested in their humdrum chats than in the impending doom of Arcadia Bay.



13



14

DANTE'S INFERNO

DANTE ALIGHIERI
AND BEATRICE PORTINARIDante and Beatrice, sitting in Hades,
E-V-I-S-C-E-R-A-T-I-N-G

We know we've been highlighting the little, beautiful parts of romance, but it's worth bearing in mind how many people Dante kills to rescue his darling Beatrice from an eternity in hell. In order: Death, Charon the ferryman, King Minos, Cleopatra, Cerberus, about a thousand unbaptized babies, his own dad (sort of) and Satan himself. Twice. If your own partner wouldn't do this for you, ditch them immediately. They're not worth your time, take it from us.



15

THE DYNASTY WARRIORS SERIES

THE ROMANCE
OF THE THREE
KINGDOMSAll of China, divided into
three, U-N-I-F-Y-I-N-G

We saved the best for last. You're looking for a romance? How about a 111-year-long medieval war that gets in on the technicality that it happens to have been called *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* by the Chinese equivalent of Shakespeare? We could crowbar in the fact that there's plenty of actual lovey-dovey stuff included in there but, let's be honest, the writer just desperately wanted to shoehorn in *Dynasty Warriors* somewhere. Awful idiot.



NEXT MONTH

DARK SOULS III

OXM GOES HANDS-ON (AND HEADS-OFF)
WITH 2016'S MOST HARDCORE GAME



BURNOUT + TIGER WOODS = DANGEROUS GOLF

DOOM: HANDS-ON WITH A LEGEND REBORN

REVIEWS: FAR CRY, THE DIVISION AND HITMAN

ON SALE
29 Mar '16

SUBSCRIBE ON
PAGE 60

XBOX EXTRA

Squeezing more from your machine every month



JUST CAUSE 3

Grappling with morality/innocent civilians



86 OXM Investigates

Which airline does Agent 47 like to fly with? Blocked Airways. More jokes like that on pg 87.

88 Now Playing: Just Cause 3

Thanks to Mark Green, the poor citizens of Medici finally reach the end of their - and Rico's - tether.

90 Now Playing: F.E.A.R.

Joe S.K.R.E.B.E.L.S. dives into the H.O.R.R.O.R. gem to see if the F.A.M.O.U.S. AI still holds U.P.

91 Now Playing: Mad Max

Fallout 4 may hog the headlines (and our play time), but the apocalypse is more fun in a car.

92 Making Of: Life is Strange

Dontnod's time-bothering teen drama won us over in 2015. We ask the devs how they did it.

94 Live Spotlight

Sparrows race, a Hawk bombs and *Need for Speed* lacks any bird puns we can make. Drat.

96 OXM Replay

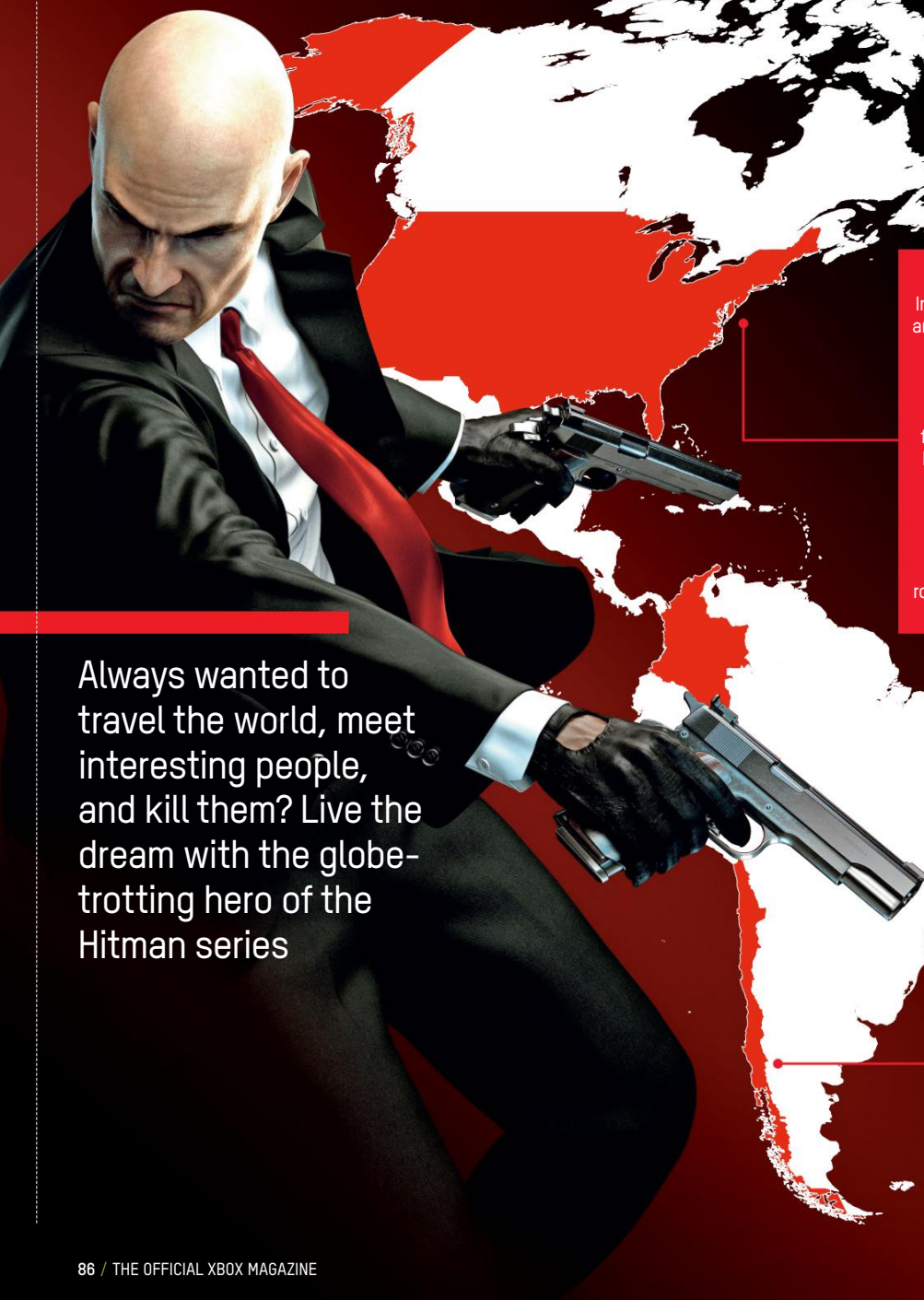
If you go down to the woods today, you're in for a... highly informative *Alan Wake* retrospective.

98 18 Game Changers

If we gained *Quantum Break*'s time-altering powers, here's how we'd make games better.



AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 SLAYS



Always wanted to travel the world, meet interesting people, and kill them? Live the dream with the globe-trotting hero of the Hitman series

USA

Incredibly, Agent 47 doesn't arrive stateside until *Hitman: Blood Money* – that's the fourth game in the series. Once he arrives, however, he rarely leaves. Aside from a short mission set in England, the controversial *Hitman: Absolution* is set almost entirely in the Land of the Free, its story of betrayal sending the embattled bald guy on a road trip that takes him from Chicago to South Dakota.

CHILE

Hitman: Blood Money's first "proper" sandbox level takes us to a vineyard in the Chilean countryside, which unbeknownst to its visitors is little more than a front for a cocaine empire. The vineyard disguise even extends to a walk-in tour of the cellar, where both grapes and opportunities for fatal "accidents" ripen.

THE NETHERLANDS

A constant theme throughout the Hitman games is that Agent 47 has an uncanny knack of picking *the worst possible time* to execute his hits. In one memorable mission from 2004's *Hitman: Contracts*, he arrives on his target's doorstep at the exact same time as Rotterdam's police force. Ever resourceful, Agent 47 can piggyback onto the raid if he can "procure" a uniform, but he'll need to break off and locate his victim before the police can take the guy alive.

RUSSIA

A little collateral damage is an acceptable on-the-job hazard. But what happens when your target is surrounded not by disposable trash collectors or bus conductors, but by high-ranking army generals? Faced with just such a situation in a memorable mission from *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin*, Agent 47 finds himself perched on a frostbitten ledge, staring down a sniper rifle barrel as the Agency drip-feeds you info on the target's appearance in a high-stakes game of Guess Who. Only when you have enough intel to identify the fiend can you pull the trigger.

OXM
INVESTIGATES



Uncovering
the other side of
Xbox gaming

HONG KONG

It is here (after a brief training demo) where we get acquainted with Agent 47 for the very first time, in 2000's PC exclusive *Codename 47*. (If you haven't played it, you're not missing much: it's as rough as a raccoon's ass, but set the table for the games that followed.) Mr Barcode touches down in Hong Kong to bump off the Red Dragon triad leader Lee Hong, but finds him too well guarded for even his enterprising means. Sparking a gang war with a neighboring triad family is the key to whittling down his defenses.

ROMANIA

Agent 47 travels to transgressive Transylvania on the trail of the "Meat King" – a deviant type suspected of kidnapping your client's daughter. Never one to pass up a tray of canapés, Agent 47 chooses to off his target while he's hosting a fetish party at his meat-packing plant. With so many distractions around, Agent 47 easily slaughters his gluttonous target, but a gruesome discovery in one of the freezers reveals that he's already missed the window for his secondary objective – bringing the daughter back in one piece.

FRANCE

The upcoming game's vast, opulent Parisian level must be giving Agent 47 déjà vu – this isn't the first time our bald saboteur has visited the French capital. Most famously, in *Hitman: Blood Money*'s Curtain Call, 47 brazenly offs a famous tenor during an opera rehearsal. A scene in which the tenor faces a firing squad in the play's final act offers a cunning way to say adieu to your target without getting your hands dirty. If only you can find your way to the props department...



NOW
PLAYING

The games we're
still going back
to, and why

This is how we exit
our offices every
day. It's fun, but
the janitors don't
half moon about it.

Mark Green is playing... Just Cause 3



BECAUSE... "There are people in Medici who aren't on fire yet"

▲ **LOVING** Rico's taunts. "Try storing fuel now, you jerks!" ▼ **HATING** Rico's taunts on the 100th hearing

Literally, it's the little things in *Just Cause 3*. My extensive experiments have concluded that it's the teeny-tiny bits of debris that trigger levels of vehicular Armageddon normally reserved for Russian dashcam videos on YouTube.

I'm all tooled up: six full-strength tethers, five sticky mines, and all of Rico's funniest lines in his back pocket (example: "Ooh, whoops!" when he's set off an explosion so big it has its own lightning storm). Of course, you could use these powers for obvious acts of needless violence: hooking a tourist up to a passing car, watching him get dragged off screaming, then using the reel-in attack to complete his day by flying in and booting him in the stomach.

But the real delight is in the detritus. Smash two vehicles together and you'll

be left with bits and pieces that break *Just Cause 3*'s physics in spectacular ways. Tether a detached wheel to a car, retract, and – eureka! You've created a terrifying gravitational anomaly. The wheel orbits the car at terrifying speed, bits fly off and fire spews, and the car lifts off the ground and spins faster and faster until it either spontaneously births a new universe or (more commonly) flings itself miles off into the distance.

If the mad spinning fails, all is not lost: the chunk will probably look like a magnet to the car, and – if you keep retracting – try to burrow *through* the chassis, throwing off sparks and smoke until the car explodes in disgust. Sometimes, just nudging a piece of debris on the road will be enough to cause mayhem: I saw a rebel truck drive slowly over a discarded bumper then suddenly fly like a javelin over the

DETAILS

Released

Dec 2015

Dev

Avalanche Studios

Pub

Square Enix

Format Xbox One

Score 6/10

Recap

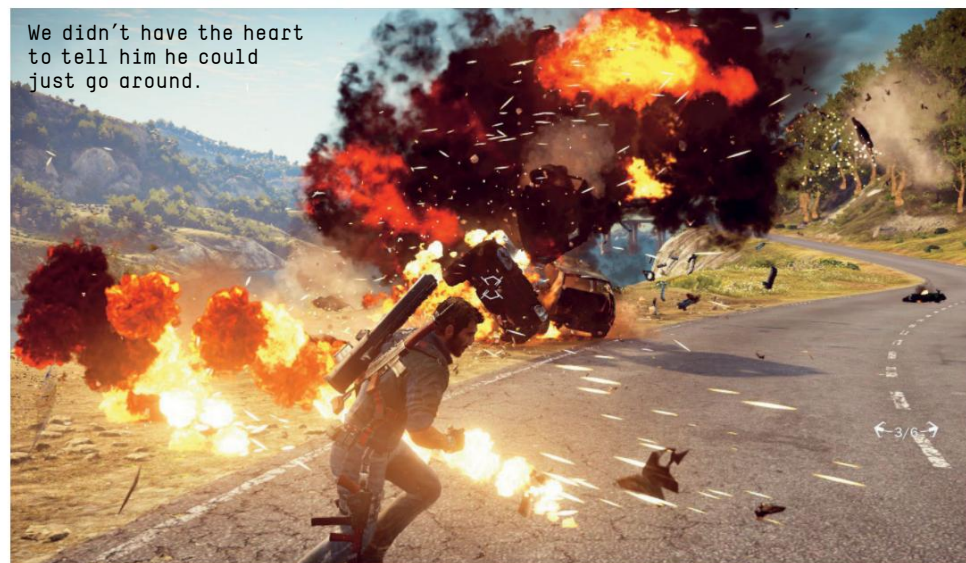
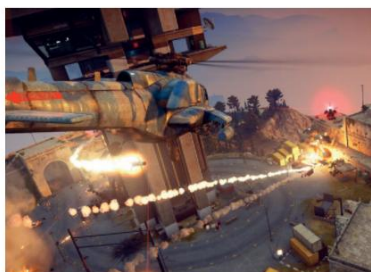
Mediterranean sandbox of explosive mayhem, powered by tethers that you can attach to literally anything. Even Michael Bay would need a lie-down.

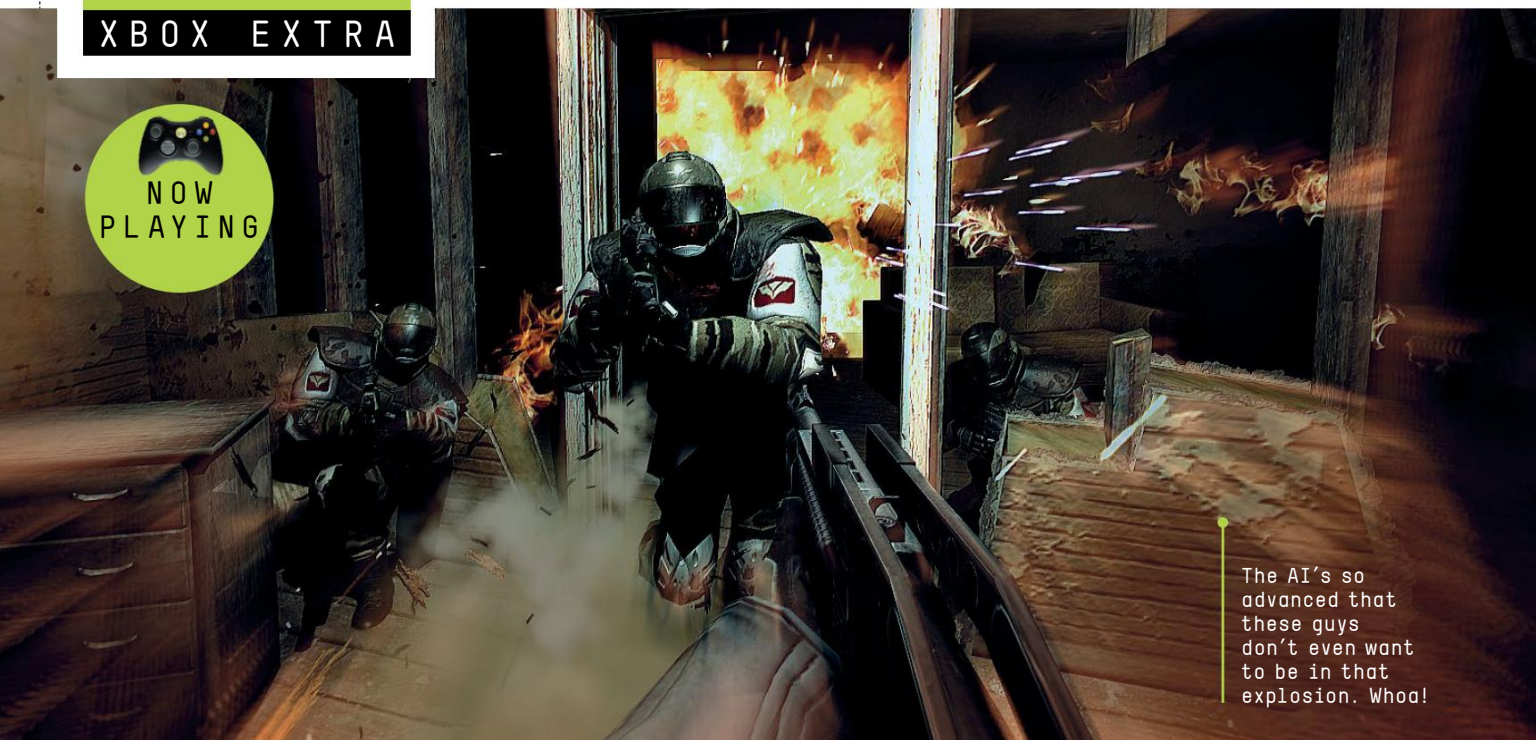
horizon, never to be seen again. I expect I'll be playing in two months' time and it'll suddenly land on Rico's head.

All this wouldn't be such gleeful fun if drivers weren't so doggedly resilient, landing from a 72,000° spin then calmly putting the car in gear and pootling off down the road. There's a *resignation* to *Just Cause 3*'s motorists that makes everything ten times funnier. Like the way they try to travel back up a vertical cliff after being flung to the bottom, groaning aloud every time they drive into the rockface. Or how they continue on their way despite lacking all their car doors and having a motorcycle glued to their windscreen – complete with motorcyclist still in the saddle.

The only NPCs who refuse to put up with my crap are the janitors at petrol stations, who return to sweep the floor even after their workplace has been razed by a rotating car landing in it. I used to think their persistence was a silly bug – but now I reckon they're trying to make sure I don't have any bits and pieces to play with. Clever. They're next in line for a reel-in kicking. ■

//I saw a rebel truck drive slowly over a discarded bumper then suddenly fly like a javelin over the horizon//





The AI's so advanced that these guys don't even want to be in that explosion. Whoa!

Joe Skrebels is playing...

F.E.A.R.



BECAUSE... "Everyone goes on about the AI and I'm sick of it"

▲ **LOVING** It's still a better shooter than most recent attempts ▼ **HATING** Endless, looping, gray environments

Talk to any frothing shooter fan about *F.E.A.R.* and they'll immediately mention the quality of the AI. Go on; try it. It's sort of unnerving how consistently it comes up, like a Fibonacci number for game criticism.

Upon replaying Monolith's schlocky horror-FPS, I've realized they are absolutely right to mention it. It's still remarkable, almost a decade later – I've had groups of guards flank me, fake me out, even loop through the back end of a building to combat-roll through a pane of glass and stick bullets up my soft behind. You can see how this studio went on to build *Shadow of Mordor*'s Nemesis system – this dev clearly loves its NPCs as much as its players.

But to put *F.E.A.R.*'s enduring quality down to that single element is to do down Monolith's work. It has dated – it comes from that brief, worrying period where character models had the waxy skin and the cold dead eyes of a Pixar previs – but in a way that feels solidly nostalgic, rather than outmoded.

Firstly, it's obsessed with slow motion, dropping *Matrix*-like whoosh sounds and bubbles of visual distortion even when you aren't gleefully hammering the bullet-time button. That's coupled with a willful inventiveness, the unfocused experimentation that comes from being an early-gen game, when no one's quite decided upon a status quo.

You can't snap to cover, making violent proceedings far more direct

DETAILS

Released

Oct 2006

Dev

Monolith Productions

Pub Sierra

Format Xbox 360

Score 8/10

Recap

Tense, clever and, these days, pleasantly retro, *F.E.A.R.*'s the kind of game developers should be looking to learn from.

than shooters would go on to be, while missing fleshy targets can kick up thick clouds of dust – subtly, forcefully prompting you to be as accurate as possible. Enemy animations are best of all – goons drop and retreat when they see squadmates get popped, shudder with every bullet and even play dead on occasion (the clue is whether they've let go of their gun), creating reactive jump scares when they resume their chase.

It feels amazing to play, simultaneously more thoughtful and caveman-ly pleasurable than most shooters have managed in recent years. That it forces you into mostly cheap, jumpy horror interludes down endlessly gray, ruined rooms between fights is its only true misstep (albeit a big one).

So I suppose what I'm saying is this: by all means continue to bring *F.E.A.R.* up as a veiled classic, but for God's sake try to mention something other than the AI. There's far more to enjoy here than nerdy, behind-the-scenes coding. ■

// Guards loop through the back of a building to combat-roll through glass and stick bullets up my behind //

Louise Blain is playing...

Mad Max



BECAUSE... "Someone needs to go back to the other Wasteland"

▲ **LOVING** Ticking off every list of collectibles ▼ **HATING** Having to check Twitter to pass the time during storms

Poor *Mad Max*. While its blockbusting big brother took 2015's movie theaters by (sand) storm, Avalanche's dusty open world just happened to release on the same day as little-known title *Metal Gear Solid V*.

And it's a real shame. Give it a chance and there's an inescapable beauty to *Mad Max*. Not only in the spectacular capture mode where I've spent an embarrassing amount of time, or even the ultra-crunchy joy of the combat – which is just *Batman* for those without morals – but in the sheer gaminess of the whole thing. This is a world full of lists of items to collect, insignias to destroy, relics to find and, most importantly, nice,



numbered things just queuing up for you to blow them into fireballs.

Mad Max doesn't do realism, but that's a good thing. If you're anything like me, *Fallout 4*'s 'collect everything but don't overfill your pockets' routine gets tedious, fast. Consider, then, this grumpy, leather-clad Australian as a healing tonic to a long slog in the Commonwealth.

DETAILS

Released
Sep 2015
Dev Avalanche Studios
Pub Warner Bros
Format Xbox One
Score 7/10

Want more scrap? It's probably really heavy, but fill your boots. Or how about these parts scattered across the Wasteland? You should probably pick all of them up, too. Then you can collect the checklisted seven lots of MacGuffins from that newly liberated camp and earn a lovely satisfying green tick.

Taking down enemy camps is a destroy-by-numbers joy, a flaming monotony that I find frankly addictive. Don't get me wrong, *Mad Max* is often atmospheric and can be unpredictable, but the fun is in the barely disguised filling of bars. After 80 hours in the other Wasteland, and very little to show for it, this might be exactly the controlled explosions the doctor ordered. Boom. ■

Tom Stone is playing...

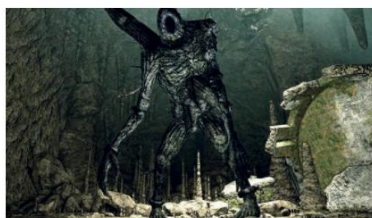
Dark Souls II



BECAUSE... "It's surprisingly easy"

▲ **LOVING** That the inferior *Souls* game is still excellent ▼ **HATING** Those eight hours I won't be getting back

Ask anyone who's heard of *Dark Souls* and they'll say it's a hard game. Ask anyone who's actually subjected themselves to it and they'll gleefully tell you that *Dark Souls* is harder than climbing a mountain made of butter. They'll brag for hours about how amazing they are for even daring to put it in the disc drive.



Thanks to a hateful new system wherein you lose permanent health upon each death, *Dark Souls II* was apparently even harder than its predecessor. This was like finding out that spiders had gained access to nuclear weapons. That irritating health penalty was a game-changer, making the opening hours as brutal as promised. Victory had never seemed so impossible. When I entered the lair of the first boss, I almost fainted at the endless expanse of his health bar.

Then something incredible happened. I found the Last Giant, the debut boss of 2014's toughest game, *easy*. The giant was slow, with clearly telegraphed attacks. You could get in multiple hits, dodge-roll, then still have time for a nap before it even considered counter-

DETAILS

Released
Mar 2014
Dev
FromSoftware
Pub
Namco Bandai
Format Xbox 360
Score 9/10

striking. It was over in no time. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Witnesses later said I cried. I guess we'll never know. Only one explanation – I was now a gaming master. No doubt I could finish the game one handed. If *Souls* couldn't challenge me, what could? My ego grew ten times that day, crushing the logical part of my brain. I was untouchable.

Or perhaps the first boss of *Souls II* just suffers from weak design. Boss two, the Pursuer, an armored knight with seemingly no weaknesses, took me eight hours of attempts. Am I mad that *Dark Souls II*'s erratic difficulty briefly tricked me into thinking I was the best player who'd ever lived? Of course not, I chuckle, throwing the disc into the bonfire. Rest in peace, liar. ■



IN THE MAKING

A behind the scenes look at the games we love

Joe Skrebels revisits...

Life is Strange

Interviewees... Michel Koch and Raoul Barbet, co-directors at Dontnod

If we could time travel, we'd remove all those 'parental advisory' posters.

Beginning as a slightly wonky teen drama before becoming one of 2015's most celebrated surprises, the progression of *Life is Strange* is almost as interesting a saga as that of its characters. The teens 'n' time travel episodic adventure-drama was planned out from the beginning, but developed in chunks, making for a game that evolved as it went on, even reacting to the public's feelings about it in some cases. With a boxed release out now, we caught up with the game's co-directors to talk over a game that delighted and mystified us in equal measure.

OXM *Life is Strange* is such a mash-up of styles – there's time travel, teen drama, a mystery – which of those elements came first?

Michel Koch At the very beginning, the idea was to extend the Memory Remix sequences from our previous game, *Remember Me*. The idea was really to keep this in mind – the fact that you can change some small things in the past and have huge consequences – and to play with time, and make this mechanic into a whole game.

After that came what we call the style of the game – what will the

story be? Who are the characters? What are the things we want to talk about? All of this gathered and became *Life is Strange*.

OXM For a game that's so lauded for its storyline and its approach to certain themes, that it came out of a game mechanic is fascinating. Did the storyline just fall into place afterwards?

MK When we went into pre-production, we really worked a lot on that, because it's important to us for the game to be completely cohesive. That's the way we created the gameplay, the characters, the rewind mechanic, the art direction, the sound and music, the UI. The main theme, of course, was choice and consequences, but we also wanted a coming-of-age story, where in the end we really wanted to show the player that sometimes you shouldn't look back to the past, you should try to go forward, not to try and change everything.

OXM When the reviews came out for Episode 1, there was quite a lot of criticism of the style of dialogue – and yet by Episode 5, in retrospect, I saw that early dialogue as an indication that Max and Chloe were



MICHEL KOCH & RAOUL BARBET

After meeting while making Dontnod's earlier game, *Remember Me*, Raoul and Michel were elevated to co-directors, bringing their skills in narrative and art design to the forefront.

just young and naive. Was that the idea? How did you react to the criticism?

MK That was exactly the idea. Max is very much a teenager, and she lives in a teenager's world, so we wanted to use some of those archetypes that players are used to seeing from TV shows, from books or from films – but we really wanted them to evolve over the course of the episodes, to show that not everything is black or white.

For the writing, we worked really closely with our American writer, Christian Divine, to try and find the lingo used by teenagers – but also to look at it geographically, in Oregon and north California. So we worked a lot on that to try and find the kind of words that teens use there – like the word 'hella', which is used in those parts of the States, and only there, actually!

Of course, when we did read the criticism, we took it on board, because we know that nothing can be perfect. But we did also try to keep our vision and what we had designed – we didn't want to change everything just for the sake of changing things.

OXM Episode 2 seemed like the moment *Life is Strange* fully crossed over from 'interesting prospect' to a genuine hit. What's unusual is that Episode 2



sidesteps the main story to some extent and focuses much more on the Kate Marsh character. Why make that dramatic move?

MK The episodic format means we can focus on specific themes. In Episode 2, it's all about cyber-bullying. We always knew that Kate would become a very important part of talking about this theme, so we had to be careful to develop the right relationship between her and Max. Having this in mind, each time we began an episode, we thought about all the characters, asking ourselves if they are important enough. The episodic format pushed us to be efficient from a creative point of view, and be careful about how the story of the characters will change.

OXM Do you almost see *Life is Strange* as a teaching tool in some way?

Raoul Barbet No, I don't think so. It's more about presenting those scenes and making people think about them. After the scene with Kate, we got so many letters from people explaining that they've been in the same situation as her. It's very heartbreaking for us to read that, but we see that there really is a need to talk about those things. It's important to have games that are fun to just play with friends, but I think this medium can also be used to talk about those themes. A lot of players are very happy to see they're not alone in confronting those difficulties.

OXM Were you ever expecting to receive that kind of response?

RB We knew that some subjects are difficult, and we had to be careful. As creators, we're responsible for those themes. For example, in the Kate scene there was a lot of this concern about how we could talk about those subjects without shocking or making

Having a rich family doesn't mean you can push people around, Nathan.

them too game-y. I think it's important to keep in mind that this kind of subject is real, and some players might have gone through it themselves. We wanted to have some feedback like this, but the response was huge.

OXM A recurring idea throughout *Life is Strange* are areas that allow for moments of reflection. What made you include the ability to just sit down and have a think?

MK [Laughs] Internally, we call those 'zen sequences' – they're all those moments where we want the player to be able to take their time and to think about what's happening. When we were designing those moments, it was really to give some reward to the player and to make them want to continue, and have more moments like this.

We added some voiceover of Max's thoughts, we added camera angles you'd never see if you didn't take your time, and some layers of music. By giving those rewards, the player gets used to playing the game more slowly.

RB We're living in a world that's really fast, people are taking less and less time even in real life. We really wanted to show that sometimes you should just sit somewhere and enjoy the moment, to take your time, look around and think about what's happening.

OXM I know that some were disappointed with the perceived imbalance of the game's two possible endings. Is there anything about how the game ended that you would prefer to alter in retrospect?

MK The way the game ends, with those two choices, two endings, that's really the way we had thought of it from the beginning. Of course, we read some of the criticisms, and when you get so invested in anything – a game, a show, a book – you're creating your own ideal version of the ending in your mind. And I guess in some ways what Max is doing is trying to make her own ideal version of the world. But in the end, you have to face consequences.

That's the message of the game, that, in the end, Max has to take one of those two decisions. We're really happy with those endings, because it really conveys for us that main message. You cannot try to cheat everything, you cannot make things perfect. I don't think we'd change anything.



Potted review

PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX / **DEVELOPER** DONTNOD / **RELEASE DATE** JAN 2015 / **OXM SCORE** 9/10

Being a teenager is simultaneously awful and brilliant. If *Life is Strange* is only remembered for one thing, let it be that it captures the sensations of adolescence better than any game. If there's a second thing, though, surely it'll be the central relationship between Max and former BFF Chloe. The latter careens back into Max's life when she is shot after an altercation in the restroom of the elite academy at which Max is studying photography. Witnessing the fight, Max suddenly finds herself able to rewind time to save Chloe.

Max's powers make for a neat narrative hook, and factor into some clever puzzles as well as a missing girl subplot that assumes greater importance in later episodes. This leads to some of *Life is Strange*'s biggest surprises, and yet it's not as interesting as the process of simply watching Max and Chloe resume their friendship.

Scenes unfold in a fuzzily wistful, golden-hour haze that recreates that feeling of magical moments shared with someone we care deeply for. So much so that it's not nearly as ruinous as it could be when the characters' mouths move with all the grace of a puppet, or when dialogue lands with an almost audible clunk.

Yes, we may come to mock *Life is Strange*'s awkwardness, its uneven script and infrequent tonal missteps. But ask yourself this: can you think of a portrayal of teenage friendship in games more powerful and affecting than that of Max and Chloe? We're not sure we can.



Reports from
Xbox's biggest
communities



One of the daily bounties asked you to perform tricks while airborne. Cue frantic supermanning.

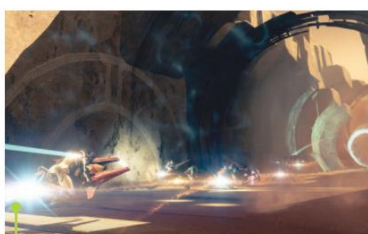
Destiny: The Taken King

Think there's not enough to do in *Destiny* these days? Get on your bike (sorry)

Details Dev Bungie / Pub Activision / Reporter Nathan Brown



SRL was an easy way to polish off tricky PVP quests.



The racing was *Destiny's* only holiday event.

For three weeks in December, Bungie gave *Destiny* players what *Destiny* players love more than anything: something new to complain about. A time-limited speeder-bike racing event wasn't quite the meaty content drop the game's increasingly disgruntled players wanted.

There were no new missions, just a handful of daily bounties and a new rep bar to fill. There were no hot new guns to hunt down. You wanted a raid? Well, sorry. On the face of it, Sparrow Racing League wasn't very *Destiny* at all. Yet in many ways, it was a perfect fit.

For a start, it just felt *marvelous*. There has always been something thoroughly satisfying about chucking a Sparrow around the place at speed, but before SRL it was simply a way of getting from A to B in quick time; a means to an end. Here, it was both. You weren't just getting to a destination, you were getting there quickly, perfectly, while

ON THE CLOCK
How we spent our time in the game



25% Bouncing off walls after comically understeering
25% Bouncing off walls after comically oversteering
45% Sighing wearily at garbage loot drops, or none at all
5% Winning

//A three-week racing event was only a Band-Aid on *Destiny's* biggest problem//

stopping five others from doing the same, and looking good while doing it.

On the track, SRL was defined by two fundamental additions. Pass through one of the dozens of boost gates and your top speed would go up for a while; miss, and it went down. There's your racing line, but holding a fixed course is no easy feat in a Sparrow. To help, Bungie added a sharp sideways dodge that not only acted as a course correction, but would also knock anything out of the way, fostering a sense of friendly competition in a game-mode that as good as guaranteed a loot drop for every player in every race.

So, what was there to complain about? Loot, obviously. The dice rolls that form *Destiny's* beating heart meant that one player's max-Light helm was another's awful blue gauntlets. And a three-week event was only a Band-Aid on *Destiny's* biggest problem: a lack of meaningful things to do.

Sparrow Racing is sure to return, but it will take more than that to keep players on the hook until the next big thing. ■

IF YOU DO ONE THING IN DESTINY THIS MONTH, MAKE IT... Whatever you like! Then go on Reddit and complain about it, like everyone else.



It's better than the last TMNT film. That's not a compliment.



Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5

Heroes in a half-finished game

Dev Robomodo / Pub Activision / Reporter Tom Stone

Remember finding out Santa wasn't real? *Pro Skater 5* was more disappointing. It was like finding out Santa is real, because you've just hit him with your car and need to dig a grave. It's a woefully under-developed, glitch-ridden mess – if you'd glued four Xbox One discs to the bottom of a plank you'd have gotten a better skating experience.

But now a patch aims to fix everything. The dire framerate has improved, music doesn't cut out randomly and it doesn't crash nearly as often. Let's not forget that a game with all these problems retailed for \$59.99. The patch also adds two new levels and lets you skate as the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Tyler the Creator. *TMNT* fans should hold out for Platinum's game instead.

//A lot's been fixed: what was once broken is now just boring//

So a lot's been fixed. 10/10 then? Well, no. What was once broken is now just boring. As comebacks go, that's hardly *Rocky Balboa*.

It's not even *Rocky IV*. A decent framerate just lets us admire all its failings with smoother animation. Like watching a video of a childhood pet die on Blu-ray instead of VHS, a traumatic experience isn't saved by technical upgrades. Unchanged missions still aren't fun. Gimmicks like projectile-firing and double-jumping remain awful. In some levels, it doesn't even escape the framerate woes.

The two new levels are no fun, which is at least consistent with the rest of the game. Plus Robomodo never did find a gimmick it didn't think brilliant, so we get shrinking Tony to worm into parts of the new Wild West level. It's like it's learnt nothing. But we have. Patches heal injuries, they can't bring back the dead. ■

IF YOU DO ONE THING IN THPS5 THIS MONTH, MAKE IT... Deleting it from your hard drive and downloading *OllieOllie* instead.



XBOX EXTRA



New parts bolster your options for six cars, including the Civic Type-R.

Need For Speed

Ghost Games mixes old and new in its latest expansion: Legends

Dev Ghost Games / Pub Electronic Arts

Reporter Ben Maxwell

You know what it's like. You're wrestling with an argumentative opposite lock, all elbows and flailing tongue, when one of your select group of needy friends calls you for the seventh time that night – despite currently taking part in the same race – to lure you across town to fistbump you with alarming frequency. It's enough to make you want to block their numbers.

Well now... you still can't. But you *can* mute the ringtone on your phone in the new Legends update (your old phone was less customizable than your cars) and take a rain check on the halfwits' invitations. They won't stop calling, but at least you won't hear when they do. The other big addition is the return of charisma-vacuum Eddie, along with long-suffering counterpart Melissa, from *Need For Speed: Underground*.

//Charisma-vacuum Eddie is back from NFS: Underground//

Spike and Eddie "go way back" – which for some reason means they can't race – so Spike makes you his proxy to take him down.

This means 15 new events (assuming you've reached rep level 25) and the chance to take Eddie's Skyline – the only new car – from him. This new discipline thread is joined by a suite of 113 new car parts, 20 new wraps based on previous cars in the *NFS* series (as well as a host of tunes from the same games), the ability to customize your brake discs and calipers, and a new reputation cap of 70. Best of all, you can now invite (and be declined by) everyone in a game session to any event, irrespective of whether you're in a crew together. The Icons update that was released in late November loosened the game's heinous rubberbanding, and Legends builds on this with tweaked AI and improved framerate stability. The 'speed' part of the equation is in hand, then, but we're still not sure about the 'need' bit. ■

IF YOU DO ONE THING IN NFS THIS MONTH, MAKE IT... Head to Settings, then Audio Settings, and switch 'Incoming Message Sound' to off.

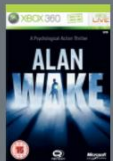
THE OXM
REPLAY

Revisiting the
resolutionally-
challenged

Alan must burn
off enemy shields
with light before
inflicting damage.

Alan Wake

Paul Randall shines a light on Remedy's episodic thriller



DETAILS

Dev Remedy
Entertainment
Pub Microsoft
Released
May 2010
Scored 8/10

More than half a decade after its release, I now realize that *Alan Wake* was years ahead of its time. Which feels like an odd thing to discover given that, back in 2010, this action-horror game wasn't even as progressive as its original pitch. *Alan Wake* was supposed to be an atmospheric open-world psychological frightfest: *Silent Hill* expanded to a vast, forested county. Instead, it was a linear journey with isolated action flashpoints and many slow-paced scenes of narrated show-and-tell.

In the giddy days of 2010, amid a sea of *Gears of Wars* and *Halos*, many asked an understandable question: "Where's my action?" Occasional set-pieces thrill – the clear highlight being a farmyard rock concert with Finnish group Poets of the Fall providing the soundtrack as author Alan puts down his pens and fights the hordes of darkness with loud music and fireworks – yet for the most part *Alan*

Wake is more interested in spinning an interesting tale than your itchy trigger fingers. When the game's first four words are "Stephen King once wrote" its intentions are unmistakable: this is all about its literary leanings.

Sure enough, Alan's gloomy trek through the forests of Washington state as he searches for his missing wife is packed with exposition. Not only does Alan narrate the journey, but our confused hero's forever picking up manuscript pages of a story he doesn't recall writing, frequently offering ominous hints of attacks yet to come. That the prose is poor is somewhat forgivable (if Dan Brown can get published, I can let Alan's slop slide), but for an action game, *Alan Wake's* downtimes are long indeed.

Woody Alan

But can you really call *Alan Wake* an action game? With the benefit of six years of gaming evolution behind us, the answer is clearly 'no'. Rather, it's a cool early example of what snooty critics now scornfully label 'walking simulators'. It could be a precursor to *Gone Home*: a guided tour through a compelling world, only in Mr Wake's case this trip happens to contain a fair

few scenes of back-against-trunks scuffles with possessed locals.

Though simple, its combat is effective. With Darkness being the main antagonist, Alan's biggest weapon is light. He uses torches to burn off enemy shields before guns can take effect and finish them off, and lighting flares while surrounded results in fist-pumpingly satisfying slow-mo camera spins as your attackers recoil from the blaze. Panicked dashes to the safety of lit bulbs when torch batteries or bullet reserves are depleted (pools of light beneath these bulbs act as checkpoints and dispel attacking hordes) are always frantic, especially if one flickers out, necessitating another sprint or a quick recharge QTE.

Not only did *Alan Wake* beat its true genre's rise to popularity by a few years, it also successfully predicted the rise of episodic gaming. Thanks to the likes of Telltale's *The Walking Dead* and Dontnod's *Life is Strange* we're now used to digesting games in five or six episodes, but *Alan Wake* established the format early and even shelled out on licensed music for each chapter's end credits (David Bowie and Roy Orbison? Take a bow, Remedy). Being released as a

//It's an exemplary early
example of the popular
'walking simulator' genre//



INFLUENCED BY...

STEPHEN KING

Bag of Bones and *The Dark Half* especially



INFLUENCE ON...

► QUANTUM BREAK

Narrative gets episodic in Remedy's blockbuster.

complete adventure, on one disc, was symptomatic of gaming in 2010.

There's just one main flaw, and it's Remedy's failure to realise *Alan Wake's* full potential until the DLC episodes, in which Alan literally brings his writing to life and conjures objects into the world by shining light on floating words. It's here the game's most alive, as I'm forced to carefully pick my way through a field of floating text and keep my torch's beam under control. Illuminating 'flaregun' spawns precious ammo into the world, whereas shining light onto 'ravens' hatches an unkindness of the demonic birds. Linger too long on 'boom!' and batches of words all go up in a flash to punish my sloppy aim.

It's a smart and thrilling powderkeg of a finale for a game released out of its ideal timezone. Remedy's own spotlight has since shifted onto *Quantum Break*, but surely the developer knows that a returning Alan would thrive better than ever in this advanced generation. ■

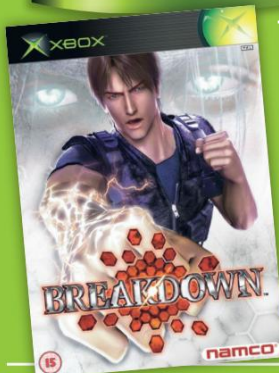


WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

Remedy fell down the rabbit hole for XBLA's Arizona-based spin-off *Alan Wake's American Nightmare*.

XBOX EXTRA

GAME ROULETTE



The Games Cupboard of Doom doors creak open once more, and we grimace and thrust an arm inside, hoping to pull out a disc worth playing...

THIS MONTH... BREAKDOWN

Long before *Mirror's Edge* showed us a vision of first-person gaming without a gun surgically implanted in our protagonist's chin, Namco curio *Breakdown* laid the foundations for EA's 'revolutionary' free-runner. It did first-person platforming, fisticuffs and even first-person burger munching followed by first-person vomiting into a toilet: a sight known in OXM Towers as the 'post boozier McDonalds relapse'.

So how come Faith's rooftop workout achieved cult hero status while Derrick Cole's trippy fighter was relegated to the 'Name That Obscure Game' round of Xbox-themed pub quizzes?

Its central premise – first-person brawling – deserves

much of the blame. Unleashing a few slow uppercuts and high kicks followed by a brief blocking session and then repeating the pattern against bald mutant clones makes its core combat a rather tedious affair.

And the t-word strikes again when it comes to *Breakdown's*

environments. Some narrative quirks aside, the action takes place in blank, super-

“First-person burger munching followed by first-person vomiting”

wide corridors that make your dentist's waiting room look like Disneyland. Its copy-and-paste world, decorated in four whole shades of gray, is at odds with a game boasting interesting ideas elsewhere, turning what could have been an underground hit into 'that confusing first-person adventure where you keep drinking cans of soda to top up your health'.



15 THINGS WE'D GO BACK IN TIME TO CHANGE

Quantum Break's time-traveling power has got us thinking. If we could go back in time, after canceling our bets on the New York Mets winning the 2015 World Series and investing the money in lottery tickets instead, which gaming moments would we most like to change?



01 Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5
It's like the "would you kill Hitler's mom?" argument. If you could go back in time and prevent Activision ordering all of those extra crates of tequila for the office party, could you stop *THPS5* from ever being created?

02 Fallout 4
We'd mediate peace between the US and China, and live happily ever after in a 1950s utopia with our robot butler and green-screen computer.

03 Xbox 360 launch
J Allard... Steve Ballmer... This is the future calling. We just want to point out that naming your second console "360" is going to give your successors a headache when the time comes for them to name the third one.

04 Xbox 360 launch part II
We'd also like to note that shipping your console with a 20GB hard drive (13GB usable) might make perfect sense while you're imposing a 64MB limit on downloadable games, but pretty soon you're going to abolish that and allow people to install entire DVDs. Just saying.

05 Xbox 360 launch part III
One last thing. There's something a bit wrong with the heat sinks on these early models, so best include a postage-paid label to the service center with your first few batches...

06 Metal Gear Solid V
We'd visit Koj's office, just as he was about to start working on Act Two, and we'd say, "Hideo, pal. Come on, think about this. Is that *really* a good idea?"

07 Life is Strange
If only we could extend Max's time-travel abilities, meaning she could rewind and stop herself signing up for that creepy small-town college in the first place. Problem solved!

08 Halo 5
Remember the part where you see Master Chief putting on his helmet but his face is out of shot? We'd reposition the camera a little to reveal that MC is actually – shock! – a woman with a rather gruff voice. Microsoft's very own Samus Aran moment.

09 Every RPG ever
"You have proved your skill by decimating our enemies and bringing security to our village,



13 Elite: Dangerous
Visiting the galactic core seemed like a good idea at the time, but now we're 20,000 light years from civilization, our canopy is starting to crack, it's going to take a dozen solid hours to get home, and we still haven't seen the black hole at the center.



10 Doritos Crash Course
We'd stop our past selves downloading this free dross on Xbox 360, thereby preventing it from sitting on the Xbox One's "ready to install" page as a reminder of how low we once stooped for Gamerscore.

but before I hand over the item you require, I must insist that you complete a set of menial tasks."

11 The Witcher 3
We'd go right back to the start and create a spreadsheet of every quest and how soon we should complete it in order to avoid it turning gray because we'd totally over-leveled elsewhere.

12 FIFA 16
If only we could zip back a few years to warn EA that the

legitimate businessmen who run football would eventually turn the FIFA brand into something toxic. Oh, and perhaps to start thinking about new names for the Tiger Woods games, too.

14 Ori and the Blind Forest
One quick timewarp is all it would take to warn Naru that a diet consisting solely of oranges might make you resistant to the common cold but won't save you from starvation if the orange harvest ever fails.

15 The internet
We'd go all the way back to when the internet was first created for scientists to share simple pages of text, and warn them that some day people would need to use it for *serious* stuff like installing games. So please make your internet bigger and faster. Also: watch out for that Y2K thing.

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XBOX ONE EXCLUSIVE



TIME IS POWER
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